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HI WADDIES, glad you came around for another trail jaunt, and we will just saddle our cayuses and take another of those rides over the old time trails. There was romance, danger, love and hate along all those early-day trails leading westward, over which pioneers traveled in their quest for new homes, fortunes, gold and adventure.

We were just reading in the paper the story of a grandmother of Joplin, Missouri, a lead and zinc mining town in Southwest Missouri, who had hitchhiked to Denver, Colorado, carrying with her an old and age yellowed map which she claimed was the key to Arizona's legendary Lost Dutchman mine. She revealed that a great-great-uncle had passed the map on to her, but she needed a grubstake before she could go hunting for the gold.

This grandmother, Mrs. Laura Middaugh, runs true to the type of the old time prospector in that it seemed that they never grew too old to keep prospecting as long as they could get around. The many offers of assistance she got from people in almost all walks of life in and around Denver are proof that now, as in the old days, people are ever ready to take a chance on hidden or lost treasures.

The Lure of Gold

The word gold still brings excitement when it is used in connection with some new find, or the supposed location of some of the several legendary lost mines. There is no doubt that if the news were flashed over the country that there were a new gold strike anywhere, people would at once flock to the new area, just as they flocked to California in '49 or to the Klondike when the news went forth that gold had been discovered in Alaska or to Deadwood, South Dakota, when gold was discovered there.

There is no doubt, either, that with such a discovery there would immediately spring up another boomtown mining camp, just as they sprang up with the gold discoveries of yesteryear. There would no doubt be the same lack of law enforcement that made other boomtown mining camps or towns notorious. In those days the badmen, gunmen, gamblers and outlaws seemed to be among the first arrivals in any boomtown, and if organization for crime was necessary they seemed to get organized before the law had time to get a hold on the community.

There is also little doubt that after a short session of lawlessness, much shorter than some of those in the early mining towns, the law would get the upper hand of the lawless element and there would develop heroes on the side of law and order who would take their places besides such noted Western lawmen of the past such as Jeff Milton, Billy Breakenridge, Tom Smith, Billy Tilghman, and many others who helped to bring law and order to the mining towns.

Wild and Woolly Deadwood

Of all the boomtowns Deadwood held sway as a wild and woolly, rough and tumble town longer than any of the others. This was because it remained an inland town, a town without a railroad, served only by stagecoach and freight wagon for some fifteen years.

Deadwood started, as had other mining towns, with a boom, but while others flared up and then died out or became railroad towns, Deadwood lived and prospered as an inland or stagecoach mining town, a rip-

(Continued on page 8)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

roaring community which wrote new pages in American history and won a reputation that was practically worldwide.

Starting with thousands of excited gold seekers panning gold in the streams and crowding into cabins in spite of the order from the United States Government to stay out of the Sioux reservation, the outlaw camp of Deadwood had a noisy birth, and even in the first year of its existence the pages of its history were bloody. It made the headlines of the papers throughout the country and its history has filled countless pages of literature.

The Gulch

Deadwood Gulch! The name even to this day seems to spell romance and danger! The business part of the town or camp was built in the gulch, and in Deadwood Gulch anything was likely to happen and something was always happening.

Like other mining camps Deadwood had its characters; characters who helped write its history, characters like Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Preacher Smith, Buckshot Bill, Cold Deck Johnny and many others. In fact, Deadwood seemed to have more of them than any of the other mining towns or camps.

Wild tales of fabulous wealth in gold mines around Deadwood were told in many parts of the world, and they were not all false. There were many rich mines. Mines so rich that they were guarded night and day by strong determined men, well armed and ready to beat off any invasion of claim jumpers or mine bandits.

The wealth of the gold mines around Deadwood, however, was no greater than the legendary wealth of the Lost Dutchman mine in Arizona, which the Missouri Grandmother is trying to find.

There is a saying that "the mines men find are never as rich as those they lost". There are many supposedly lost mines, but perhaps none with as impressive a story behind them as the Lost Dutchman, the subject of many legends. Thousands have sought the mine and at least a dozen have been killed in the search.

Each February, the Dons' Superstition Mountain Lost Gold Trek, a mock search for

the Lost Dutchman Mine, is conducted by a young men's organization of Phoenix. This event, arranged for the entertainment of winter visitors, has grown to such proportions that all reservations are usually taken weeks in advance. This non-commercial venture is an all-day hike and exploration enlivened with Western lore, food, and entertainment. A campfire fiesta at night concludes the outing.

Legends of the Lost Dutchman

According to legend, the Lost Dutchman Mine is in the Superstition Mountains about thirty-five miles east of Phoenix. The long series of very interesting legends dealing with this rich gold mine begins with a young Mexican lover fleeing the wrath of his sweetheart's father and seeking refuge far north in the forbidding Superstitions. He is supposed to have found a great gold deposit when its location was still a part of Old Mexico, but the Gadsden Purchase was about to take place, so the young man's entire Mexican community formed a great expedition and made the long march into the Superstitions.

They mined so much of the gold as they could carry and set out jubilantly for home. But the Apaches ambushed them, and killed the entire party—four hundred men—except two young boys concealed under a bush. These two children found their way back home, and grew up with the knowledge that they alone knew the location of the mine. When they were old enough they took a third partner and went to the Superstitions, finding the mine without difficulty. They had hardly begun to dig when the Dutchman came along.

The Dutchman was a prospector with a long white beard, and his name was Jacob Wolz or Walz. He had been prospecting in the Superstitions, and a band of Apaches had driven him into a part of the mountains he had never seen before.

He stumbled into the camp of the Mexican boys and became friendly with them and they told him about their mine. Wolz killed the three Mexicans and from about 1870 until his death the mine was his.

A Shoe Box of Ore

As the stories of the Dutchman's gold spread around Phoenix and Florence, many

(Continued on page 103)

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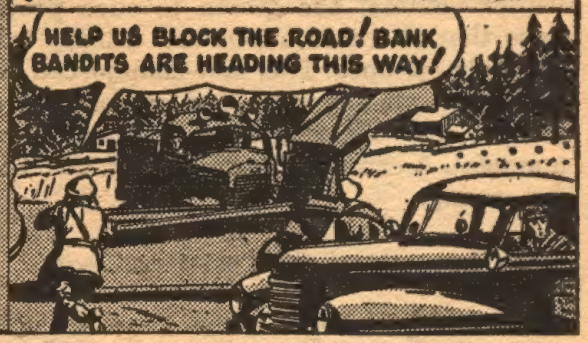

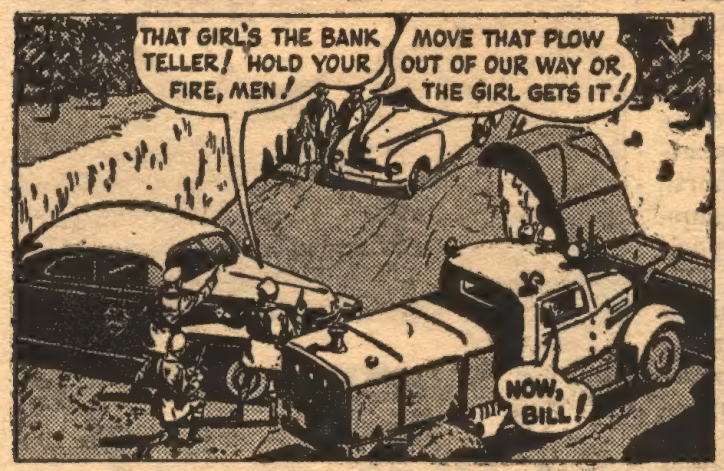

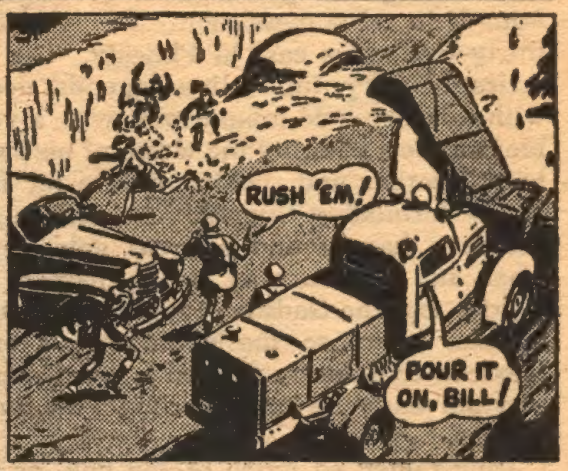

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As the crew swung back the cross-tie, a great black horse, with a rider in black, came into view (CHAPTER X)

SUNDOWN SHOWDOWN

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

When mild-mannered farmer John Castle homesteads a cattle trail pass, he unwittingly sets off a powder keg of trouble which calls for the swift justice of the Robin Hood outlaw!

CHAPTER I

Reming Goes Awooing

THE wind was up early that September morning, sweeping ostrich plumes of dust before it, putting a thin film on the watering troughs and the well, insinuating sand and grit into the bubbling pot of stew and the sourdough biscuits in the cook shack. Out on the range the boys were riding with their neckerchiefs up and cursing occasional fragments that blew into an unwary eye.

"Chuck" Daley, foreman of the Rocking R, head down and floppy sombrero pulled down to his nose, made his way

A Complete Full-Length Masked Rider Novel

from the corral to the ranchhouse, to find George Reming, his boss, fussing with his tally books in the front room. Tall, leathery and rangy, Reming looked more like the hard-riding cowhand while his foreman seemed more like the gentleman rancher.

Still a bachelor in his late thirties, Reming had clawed and scratched his spread out of the surrounding terrain until he now had the best ranch in El Verde Valley. His career now was concerned with the upbreeding of his stock. Slow and deliberate in manner and speech, he relied greatly on his more nimble-witted ramrod.

"Thought I'd ride in to Sundown," announced Daley, "and see about them cattle cars we'll be needin'. Want anything from town?"

"Pretty windy, ain't it?" Reming observed.

"Plenty," said Daley. "But I'll have it at my back ridin' up the valley. Just so my cayuse keeps his tail down."

"Keeps his tail down?" puzzled Reming.

"So's the wind won't blow him inside out."

A sudden gust of wind slammed against the side of the house, causing a miniature avalanche of cinders to rain down the chimney. Reming glanced from the fireplace to his foreman. Daley laughed for them both.

"If it ain't too windy for John Castle to go to town, I don't reckon it'll be for me," he remarked casually.

Reming frowned. "Why John Castle?"

"Castle proves up on his homestead today," Daley commented. "Final papers."

Reming's lips tightened slightly in understanding.

"Ain't yuh overlookin' a bet there, Boss?" suggested Daley.

"How d'yuh mean?" Reming countered, well knowing what was meant.

"All you cattlemen let Castle settle at Calico Pass," Daley went on gravely. "His claim covers the whole mouth of the pass—and the waters of Calico Creek run right through his land. Whoever controls Calico Pass controls the whole lower valley."

"Shucks!" snorted Reming. "John Castle ain't runnin' anything but a small chicken ranch. He ain't a cattleman, and not likely to be one at his age. Chickens is all him and his daughter can ever handle, all he knows. Castle was a farmer back in Ohio."

"But suppose he gets ideas?" said Daley. "He can deal every rancher this side of the pass a heap of misery. That cattle association yuh're workin' up with Sam Wheeler would be about like a hiccup in a whirlwind. You know yuh have to drive through the pass to get to Sundown and the railroad. You cattle raisers should of bought him out or run him off before this."

DALEY shoved back his hat, and began building a cigarette. Reming studied the supple fingers, turning the matter over in his mind.

"You don't like Castle, do yuh, Chuck?" he queried.

"It ain't that I like or dislike him," Daley said steadily. "I don't have no truck with him myself. I was thinkin' about cattle. If I'd of been here three years ago, I'd of homesteaded that section for yuh. Then yuh'd have held the whip hand over the other ranchers. Now it's too late." He cupped his hands and lighted his cigarette.

"Is it?" Reming asked, nettled. "Mebbe I got other plans."

The two men locked glances, Reming's black eyes boring into Daley's gray ones. A faint smile touched the foreman's lips.

"Then mebbe yuh better be startin' 'em," he said softly.

Reming stood up abruptly, a sour expression on his rugged features.

"Fetch me a hoss," he said curtly. "I'll ride as far as Castle's place with you."

"Yore bronc's already saddled," Daley said. "Nice day for a gallop—down wind."

"You understand me, Chuck," Reming said, half-startled, half-admiring. "Sometimes too well. . . ."

Stave Off the Grim Threat of Range War!

The formation of El Verde Valley was symmetrical, if odd. It was like a huge hour-glass nestling in these rolling hills of New Mexico. Near the middle of the twenty-mile valley two mountain ridges formed the pinched-in waist known as Calico Pass.

The sizeable settlement of Sundown was in the northern end of the valley, as were a few scattered farms and two-bit spreads. The railroad made a loop to pass through the town and avoid the

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building of a long, high trestle across the roaring waters of Calico Creek. And Sundown automatically had become a shipping point.

The southern half of the valley was a fine cattle range where seven ranchers had built up outfits. It was more fertile, thanks to the waters of Calico Creek which forked twice to flow through the lowlands, then exit from the valley in three separate places before reuniting to empty into the Rio Colorado near Mush Mountain. El Verde Valley was one of the oases in the many arid and semi-arid regions in the Territory of New Mexico.

At Calico Pass, a gap a hundred yards wide, the lusty creek roared through a deep cut alongside of which ran the cattle trail to Sundown. Here John Castle and his widowed daughter, Libby Martin, had settled three years before, building a little frame house close to the shoulder of the western ridge. Castle had planted shade and fruit trees, which had thrived. He had built a chicken run and chicken houses, and had erected a barb-wire fence around his grain fields, fencing in the lane from the cattle trail to the picket fence of his front yard.

Whether the cattlemen had been asleep or not, as Chuck Daley claimed, Castle had remained unmolested. The potential threat of a neighbor squatting athwart Calico Pass had tardily been considered. Recently, Lawyer Sam Wheeler of Sundown and the cattlemen had been organizing an association aimed at mutual protection and assistance. It was not John

Castle they feared, though. But what if he sold to some greedy individual after proving up on the place?

The two Rocking R men rode up the valley trail toward the bottle-neck pass which bisected the valley. Reming noted the fences, buildings, and trees with approval. It was peaceful and homelike here on the Castle acreage, a spot of color and comfort added to the valley.

Arriving at the turn-off lane leading to the house, Reming parted from his foreman who rode on toward the pass. Reming gigged his mount into the lane with its rows of young trees.

Inside the house, Libby Martin heard the *clop-clop* of horse hoofs approaching, and paused in mixing the dough for the week's baking. She placed the crock on the back of the stove and walked to the front door, wiping her hands on her apron.

At twenty-eight, Libby Martin was a comely woman with soft brown hair and soft brown eyes. Her mouth was tender, generous, made for smiling. Gentle laughter lived in the depths of her dark eyes, and there was the resilient spring of youth in every movement of her rounded body.

RECOGNIZING the visitor, her eyes lighted. There was something about this tall, taciturn owner of the Rocking R Ranch which attracted and repelled her at the same time. She didn't fear him, but she couldn't understand him. But gun-toting, hard-riding men of the range were a far cry from the farmers of the Ohio Valley.

"Howdy, Mrs. Martin," said Reming, as he reined in at the gate and touched his hat with a horny forefinger. "Yore dad at home?"

"Good day, Mr. Reming," Libby said pleasantly. "No, my father is in town today, but won't you come in?"

Reming uncorked himself from the saddle and stepped down.

"Reckon I might as well," he said tentatively. "Kind of windy this mornin'."

"Isn't it?" she agreed, stepped back, and opened the door widely to him. Her eyes were laughing at his diffidence as he hesitated on the porch.

"Come on in, George Reming," she urged, "before all the loose trail dust blows in ahead of you."

As though he had been spurred, Reming strode into the comfortable little living room.

"Won't you sit down?" she invited, and he awkwardly seated himself on the horsehair sofa, placing his hat on the floor between his feet. "Did you want to see Father on business?"

"No'm—just makin' a friendly call, ma'am," he said, eyeing her steadily. Then taking courage, he plunged on bluntly. "Yore dad shore has done a fine job of provin' up on this place, Miss Libby. But what made him put a chicken ranch right here in the middle of cow country?"

"That was my idea," Libby Martin told him frankly. "Before Jim—my husband—died, we had a little poultry farm. I know something about chickens, and I wanted to help." She shrugged lightly. "We couldn't afford cattle, and there's nothing much we can raise on such a small place except chickens."

"But where'll yuh sell 'em?"

"What's to prevent us from shipping eggs and poultry to market just like you ship cattle, from Sundown?" Libby demanded.

Reming nodded. "Nothin', I reckon."

"Perhaps we'll run a few head of cattle some day," Libby said, "if you and the other ranchers will lease us a little pasture land. Maybe we can build up a dairy herd. It still seems strange that ranchers have to buy what butter and milk they use."

The man's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Shore, shore," he concurred then quickly. "But buildin' up a herd takes time and experience—and help. And money. It ain't no life for a woman. Which was what I was sort of gettin' around to."

He paused, shuffled his boots, then Libby prompted him as the silence grew embarrassing:

"What do you mean, George?"

Reming cleared his throat. "*Uummm*—I mean—that is, I know I'm ugly as sin, but I ain't only thirty-six and I got the best spread down the valley. I was wonderin' if mebbe I could talk yuh into marryin' me."

Libby eyed him in amazement. "Is this a proposal, George Reming?"

Reming, having taken the bull by the horns, nodded doggedly. "It ain't nothin' else. I'll make yuh a good livin'. I'll be good to you."

The Indian's right came up in a short punch, and Cole crumpled to his knees (CHAPTER III)

"Why, I believe you mean it!" Libby said seriously.

"'Course, I mean it. Will yuh marry me, Libby—ma'am?" He spoke humbly.

"Oh, I couldn't! I can't leave Dad."

"He could live with us. I got a big house, and he could still work this chicken ranch."

The slamming of the back door and the patter of a child's footsteps interrupted him.

"Mom-mee!" called a little girl's voice. "Where are you?"

"In the front room, Susan," Libby answered quickly. Then, to Reming: "Haven't you forgotten something else, George?"

"Yuh mean Susan?" Reming asked. "Nobody forgets Susan. Look."

He drew from his coat pocket a crinkling paper bag.

A seven-year-old girl in a gingham apron and pigtails came running into the room, her blue eyes dancing in excitement.

"Oh, Mommy!" she cried, in childish glee, "Cleveland is the funniest old rooster! One of the hens just laid an egg, and Cleveland is crowing."

LIBBY put her arm around her daughter and smiled at her.

"Clevland is an old flatterer, darling. But look, we have company. Can't you speak to our neighbor?"

The child surveyed the man on the horsehair sofa solemnly.

"How do you do, Mr. Reming," she said, in quaint courtesy.

"Howdy, little pard," returned Reming gravely. "Look what I brought you." He drew a red-and-white striped stick from the bag.

"Ohhh—a peppermint stick!" Susan promptly advanced to accept it. "Thank you, Mr. Reming. Would you like to see Cleveland crowing?"

"Not just now, little pard," Reming declined, "but when he grows big enough I'll break him to saddle for yuh."

Susan laughed in delight at this whimsical suggestion. The rancher turned his black eyes on the mother.

"What yuh say, Libby? Susan likes me. Don't yuh, Susan?"

Susan was tasting the end of her candy stick. "Yes, sir," she answered dutifully.

Libby's voice was a trifle unsteady as she glanced from man to child.

"The answer is no, George, but thank you for asking."

"Won't yuh think it over, Libby—ma'am?" pleaded Reming. He was as adroit at this courting business as a wobbly-legged bull calf.

"I'm afraid there's no use," she told him as gently as possible.

"Then there's somebody else," Reming accused anxiously.

Libby shook her head slowly. "No," she said. "You know there isn't." And he did know that she was no giddy girl to listen to the blandishments of half the unattached males of the town and range, from Sam Wheeler to "Cross-eyed" Coogan of the Bar Seven.

"Then I'll still hope," said Reming, getting up. "I don't aim to stampede yuh, ma'am, but I'll ask yuh again. Reckon I better be gettin' along. *Adios*, little pard."

At the door Libby impulsively laid her hand on his arm.

"Believe me," she said earnestly, "I do appreciate the honor you have shown me."

Reming looked down at her strangely, his black eyes burning. She thought for a moment that he was going to kiss her. But George Reming didn't understand the art of wooing. He dealt in men and cattle. And rights-of-way.

"*Adios*," he repeated, and strode out to his waiting horse.

Libby closed the door with a little sigh. Susan looked up curiously.

"What was he talking about, Mommy?" she asked. "What did Mr. Reming want?"

"That, darling, is just what I am wondering," Libby answered reflectively. "Come along, let's go bake some bread for Grampa's supper."

CHAPTER II

Cork in the Bottle

AT NINE o'clock that gusty morning John Castle's spirits were as high as the wind. Chipper and spry as a yearling colt on a frosty morning, the sixty-year-old Ohio farmer headed for Sundown all bundled up in his bearskin coat, fur cap, and the gray

woolen mittens Libby had knitted for him. His thoughts were of harvests laid by, milch cows in the shed, squealing porkers, chicken dinners, and apples mellowing in barrels in the kitchen pantry. Good years ahead.

Rattling along the main street of town, cheerily hailing friends and acquaintances, he turned his buckboard in at the side of Ted Brown's general merchandise emporium and hitched Don and Dolly—his plow horses that doubled in buggy harness—alongside the loading dock.

"Tell Brown I'll be back directly!" he called to a clerk who was loading supplies into a wagon. "I want to see him."

He made his way to the Government office. Here, under the friendly guidance of Bart Henderson, the land agent and assayist, he finished the job of proving up on his homestead.

Henderson, a breezy stout man with red face, red flannels, red suspenders, and a high opinion of his own salty humor, looked affably at the grizzled head and work-gnarled hands as Castle laboriously filled out the proper legal forms.

"A great day for you, ain't it, Mr. Castle?" he offered. "Sign in them places where I marked X. Today that chunk o' land becomes yores, yore heirs' and assigns' forever, eh?"

"That's right," agreed Castle, scratching away with as much lip and tongue effort as digital movement. "It's been hard work, but I finally got somethin' to show for it."

"Yessiree!" The agent turned toward a wall map and pointed out the site with his pencil. "Half a section of land smack-dab against Calico Pass—shaped kind of like a wedge o' pie with one bite out. Too bad yuh got so much rock and hill at the north end. What yuh figger to plant there—potatoes?" He laughed.

"A quarter section for me and a quarter section for my daughter," Castle corrected. "We had to run up the mountain shoulders on each side of the pass to squeeze in our full claim just above the Rockin' R. But there's plenty of level ground for what farmin' we aim to do."

"Yessir, yuh shore put the stopper in the bottle when yuh filed there. I always thought it was funny them ranchers in the south half of the valley let yuh prove up on it. George Reming used to claim the land clear up to Calico Pass."

"Claimin' free range and homesteadin' are two different things," Castle said mildly. "But most of my land ain't good for runnin' cattle. I get along peaceable with my neighbors. . . . What else do I have to sign, Bert?"

"That's all," said the agent, gathering up the papers. "I'll record this and send it in. Yuh'll have yore title back in three-four weeks, and then yuh'll be as snug as a bug in a buffalo rug."

"What? Ain't it final today?"

"Shore, but yore title has to go through the Territory land office and they got to make up an abstract and a deed to the place. Takes a little time, but as far as yuh're concerned the matter's finished.

John Castle looked a bit discomfited. "But—but I owe Ted Brown some money. I was figgerin' on borrowin' from the bank to pay him off today. Mr. Gregg said he'd let me have it when I could give him a mortgage on my place. I promised Brown I'd take care of that."

"How come yuh owe Brown?" Henderson seemed surprised.

"It took about all I had to build the house and get started," Castle explained. "I've needed supplies, tools, wire, and feed. Brown took my personal note for it. It comes due this week."

"I see," said Henderson sympathetically. "But yuh ain't the only man to owe Ted Brown. Let the old skinflint wait a couple weeks. But who am I to talk when I myself owe him for a barrel of flour and a hundred pounds o' salt meat?" He laughed heartily, but when he elicited no response from the troubled John Castle, he sobered. "Come on over to Zeller's place, Mr. Castle," he said, "and I'll buy yuh a drink."

THEY had a snort together, then Castle, greatfully warmed by the libation, made his way to the Traders' Bank.

Peter Gregg, owner of the bank, was a horny-handed son of New England. Spare of frame, close-fisted and shrewd, he represented the money element of El Verde Valley. He also narrowly missed being a bluenose reformer. He had been a church deacon back in Vermont, and had brought all of his dogmas westward with him.

Miranda, his wife, was the best and most severely dressed woman in Sundown, with her black satin, leg-o'-mutton

blouses and prim, starched collars. She ran the church, the Sunday school and the Reverend Lewis, while Gregg ran the town.

The banker was in his private office when John Castle arrived. He shook hands cordially with his visitor, then he caught the gentle aroma of sour mash whisky and his geniality became a little strained.

"You wanted to see me on business, Mr. Castle?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," the old man replied, encouraged by the friendly greeting and failing to note the subsequent freezing up. "I thought I'd talk to yuh about makin' that loan on my place."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Gregg, thawing out again. "You were going to come in when you finally proved up on your homestead. You have done so?"

"This mornin'. Bert Henderson told me I'd get my deed and title within the next two or three weeks, but I promised Ted Brown I'd pay him what I owed him today. So I was wonderin' if yuh could mebbe let me have some money on my personal note and finish up the deal later."

Gregg's temperature dropped ten degrees. He cleared his throat carefully.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Castle, banks cannot operate on the free and easy terms suitable for private individuals. I have no worries over your moral risk, but the answer is no. The Traders' Bank can't do business that way."

"But I'm good for it," Castle declared.

"As far as your honesty is concerned I have no doubt of it. But the bank must have assets when it lends money. You wouldn't like it if you were a big depositor in this bank for me to lend your money without ample security."

"That's what I thought banks was for —to lend money when a man needed it. And the security will be here as soon as Henderson gets my deed back. I promised Brown I'd pay him. I like to keep my word, Mr. Gregg."

Gregg sniffed, and made a slight grimace.

"A man should always keep his word," he said sententiously. "But I can't keep your word for you. You come back when you have your title and we'll do business. If Ted Brown is so anxious to get his money, tell him to come over and sign your note as endorser, and I'll let you have the money today."

Castle's face lightened. "Maybe that'll work. I'll ask him."

"By all means," agreed Mr. Gregg. "By the way, Mr. Castle, Mrs. Gregg has missed your little granddaughter from Sunday school the last two Sundays."

"I'm sorry," Castle said. "It ain't always handy for us to come to town."

"Unless you want something more tangible than religion," suggested the banker in disapproval. "And I might add, Mr. Castle, that I don't hold with drinking."

"I just took one drink with Bert Henderson to celebrate my provin' up," protested Castle. "I ain't what yuh'd call a drinkin' man, Mr. Gregg."

"So I smell," said Mr. Gregg severely.

"Yuh shore do!" agreed Castle sourly, nettled beyond endurance.

Gregg blinked. "Good day, Mr. Castle," he terminated the interview.

The fine edge had been taken from Castle's pleasure as he left the bank. Perhaps proving up on a homestead wasn't so much after all. Funny how one man like Peter Gregg could take the joy out of so many things.

A freight car stood on the siding behind the store and men were unloading musty, dusty, olive-green burlap bags of cotton seed hulls and trucking them into the warehouse. Theodore Brown was on the platform inspecting the shipment when Castle arrived. He walked briskly over to join the chicken farmer.

BROWN was a wiry, middle-aged man with sun-bleached hair and mustache, and with sun-tanned features. Light gray eyes looked incongruous in his swarthy face which was as craggy as a promontory. Thin to gauntness, he was stringy and tough, like a bundle of wires. His deep bass voice was startling in so slight a man.

"Hello, John," he boomed in hearty greeting. "McGinnis said yuh'd be in to see me. How's tricks?"

"I don't exactly know," Castle confessed. "What yuh shippin' in? Cotton seed hulls?"

"Yeah, winter feed for range stock," said Brown. Them tomfool ranchers down yore way ain't learned yet to grow enough stuff to feed their cows through the off season. What's on yore mind? Yuh

look as sad as Preacher Lewis callin' on the banker's wife."

"Reckon I feel sort of the same way," was Castle's rueful response. "I proved up on my place today, but can't pay yuh up like I promised. Gregg won't lend me the money until my deed comes back."

Brown eyed him speculatively. "That won't take so long, will it?"

"Mebbe three weeks, but yuh got my note comin' due this week. I can't pay it —unless you want to sign a note with me at the bank."

"Did Gregg tell yuh that?"

Castle nodded glumly.

Ted Brown laughed. "Come on into my office," he said. "Let's see where we stand."

The old man brightened as he followed. Brown seated himself at a battered old roll-top desk, indicated a chair to Castle, and produced a bottle and glasses from a desk drawer.

"Have a drink," he invited. "Then we'll go over accounts."

The amenities over he leaned back in his chair and surveyed his companion.

"Yuh owe me two hundred and fifty-six dollars, accordin' to the books," he announced, "and I hold yore note for two hundred dollars, not countin' interest."

"I know it to the penny," said Castle.

"And Gregg promised to loan yuh five hundred on yore place. Any time he'll lend that much a place is easy worth two thousand dollars."

"But I haven't got it now," complained Castle. "All I can offer yuh is five hundred chickens."

"And strip yoreself clean," Brown added. "What would I do with five hundred chickens? There ain't that many Sunday dinners in all of Sundown, and if yuh think I'll keep 'em on the hoof till I can peddle 'em yuh ain't right bright. Nope, you keep 'em and feed 'em yoreself."

"But what'll I do for you?" demanded Castle moodily.

"Take another drink," answered Brown promptly. He poured two. "So the place is plumb yores now. Yuh've put the corncob in the jug neck."

"I reckon yuh can call it that," Castle

A woman appeared on the threshold, a double-barreled shotgun pointed directly at the Masked Rider (CHAPTER VII)

admitted. "But how'm I goin' to pay you?"

"Stop worryin' about that and drink," commanded Brown.

Dubiously the chicken rancher obeyed. This was his third shot on an empty stomach and he wasn't sure that his head would stand it. Brown studied him quizzically. Suddenly he leaned forward and placed a wiry hand on the older man's knee.

"Forget Gregg," he said abruptly. "Look, John, yuh're now all set to make a lot of money—if yuh want to. Yuh actually own Calico Pass."

"Y-yes," Castle admitted, puzzled.

"The pass is the only way to the railroad for all the cattle growers. Now if yuh was to build a fence across the pass and put in a toll-gate yuh could collect a nice revenue from the ranchers."

"But—" Castle started to protest.

"Why, at, say, fifty cents a head," Brown went on smoothly, "yuh could collect five hundred dollars a year from George Reming alone. All the others together would bring yuh double that much. Yuh'd be rollin' in money."

Castle was aghast. "Fifty cents a head! Why, the cattlemen would run me out of the country."

"Remember, you own the property. Yuh're within yore legal rights."

"No," protested Castle. "I couldn't do it. No honest man bars the right-of-way through the only outlet to market. The cattle don't hurt my place none goin' through the pass on the trail. And the ranchers don't bar me from ridin' across their land."

"This is different," said Brown persuasively. "It's plain business. Don't think they wouldn't do it to you if they had the chance. Yuh want to know how yuh can pay me, John, so I tell yuh what I'll do. I'll cancel yore note and debt and furnish the money and material to build the toll fence for a half pardnership in the deal. If yuh should need guards to enforce yore toll, I'll see that yuh get 'em. What yuh say?"

"You miss the point of the thing," Castle insisted, shaking his head to clear it. "I ain't the kind of man who'll take advantage of neighbors."

"And I ain't the kind of man who will put up with a lot of foolishness," Brown snapped. "You owe me money, Castle."

CHAPTER III

Indian Intervention

JOHN CASTLE got unsteadily to his feet. He looked down on Ted Brown as upon a monster, a man who had suddenly sprouted horns and a tail. This was a treacherous stab in the back to men with whom Brown did business, for whom he right now was unloading cattle feed.

Also, it was easy enough for Brown to sit safely in town and be a silent partner to such a scheme, but it was John Castle who would be labeled the buzzard by enraged cattlemen. It was John Castle who would have to bear the brunt of all trouble.

"There's nothin' unlawful in a toll-gate," Brown went on carelessly. "They've been in existence since time began, all over the world."

"They won't be on my ranch," Castle grated harshly.

Brown got to his feet with a laugh. "All right, all right," he said. "Take it easy, John. That was just a suggestion to help yuh out. Think it over and come back and see me next Saturday." He spoke significantly.

Feeling sick at his stomach, John Castle walked out of the general store and headed along the street, sorely troubled. He knew what Brown had meant by his reference to the following Saturday. That was the day his note was due. If he couldn't raise the money Brown might force him into a deal he loathed with all his soul. He began to wish he had never proved up on his place, that he had never left Ohio. What manner of two-legged wolves inhabited Sundown?

John Castle was badly in need of expert advice. A man's name leaped to his mind. Sam Wheeler! Sam Wheeler, the best lawyer of Sundown and friend to the ranching element. Sam, the man who stopped by the Castle place every time he rode down the valley to visit George Reming or one of the other cattlemen.

Wheeler's law office was upstairs over the Eagle Cafe. A bachelor in his early thirties, the lawyer practised his profession in the front room and lived in the

back. He ate his meals downstairs and had his entire world centered there halfway between the Government office and the one-storied stone building which housed the justice of the peace and the town marshal. Not to speak of being handy to any clients who might be languishing in the adobe jail. In fact, Sam Wheeler was a veritable beacon to men in distress.

Unknown to Castle, four men were interested in his progress. At the bar in Mike Zeller's saloon George Reming, newly arrived in town, stood taking a snifter. At the batwings, watching through a crack, was Chuck Daley. The Rocking R foreman released the swing-door and approached the bar with springlike tread.

"He's been busier'n a cranberry merchant this mornin'," he announced to his employer. "He just come from the general store. Headin' now for Sam Wheeler's, it looks like."

Reming did not break his silence.

"I cut his trail after he'd been to the bank," went on Daley. "I can't figger what he's cookin' up."

Reming grunted. "If it's any devilment, Sam Wheeler'll tell us."

"But Ted Brown won't," Daley said. "Mebbe yuh do a lot of business with him, but I don't trust that bull-voiced merchant. He's a crafty hairpin. I don't like a runt frog that sings bass."

"Stop proddin' me, Chuck, and take a drink."

"Yuh do any good with yore sparkin'?" Daley queried, reaching for a glass.

Reming's face grew as sour as a lemon. He did not answer.

Up the street, John Castle neared the Eagle Cafe. Across the dusty thoroughfare almost opposite the restaurant an Indian squatted in the sun before Lickman's blacksmith shop. He made a gleaming spot of color in his white drill trousers and white cotton shirt.

For a red man he was dazzling in his scrupulous cleanliness. About his shoulder-length black hair he wore a red bandeau. He seemed to be dozing there, oblivious to the sun, the flies, the hairy-chested smith shoeing a roan horse behind him, and the activity on the street.

Perhaps it was because of the Indian that Castle failed to notice the two men converging on him as he approached the stair door. He was suddenly rudely jostled, and looked up to find himself pinned between two strangers.

"Your name John Castle?" demanded the taller of the two in a nasal voice as sharp as a knife.

"Er—yes," admitted the chicken rancher, attempting to draw back but unable to do so.

"My name's Slim Hawkins," went on the nasal voice. "This here is my pardner, Smiley Cole."

"Slim" Hawkins was lanky, thin and tough, with a long neck and a prominent Adam's apple. "Smiley" Cole was shorter and stouter. On his round face was a permanently fixed grin. His pale blue eyes, like marbles, were usually set and staring. Only when he worked up into a killng mood was there a change. Then his queer eyes turned glassy.

BOTH men wore double gun harness. Their rather worn range garb was dusty and threadbare, their sombreros were battered and soiled. They were as hard and dangerous a pair as John Castle had ever seen. An aura of evil hovered about them like the odor of garlic.

The Indian across the street stirred, his toes gripping the hard ground beneath him through the soles of his beadwork moccasins.

"Yuh own a two-bit chicken spread down at Calico Pass, don't yuh?" said Cole, with his ghastly smile, and his voice was as soft and pleasant as a woman's.

"That's right," said Castle feebly.

"We're here to buy the place from yuh," advised Hawkins, poking a bony forefinger bruisingly against Castle's breastbone.

"I—don't—want—to sell!" gasped the alarmed chicken rancher.

"Oh, yes you do," snarled Hawkins. "Yuh need money, and we're givin' yuh five hunderd dollars for yore place as she stands. Le's amble back to the Government agent's office and sign over the deed."

"Better listen to reason, Castle," Cole purred in his ear, suggestively tightening his grip on the old man's arm. "This is a cash deal."

"No!" cried John Castle, now thoroughly frightened. "Let me go! What—" He broke off with a moan of pain as the

smiling stout man twisted his arm.

Without the slightest warning sound a pleasant baritone voice spoke at Smiley Cole's shoulder.

"Maybe the senor does not like to talk business on street. You lettum go, *si*? And a muscular brown hand bit deep into Cole's bicep.

"Scatter, redskin!" snarled Hawkins. "This is white man's business."

"Let the senor loose," repeated the Indian stolidly, his black eyes and bronzed face void of expression.

Smiley Cole's pale eyes began to go glassy. Suddenly one hand released Castle, and with it he reached for the black butt of his six-shooter. Instantly the Indian's left hand came up in a short punch to the nape of Cole's neck. The man quivered like a pole-axed steer. Stunned, he crumpled to his knees, almost dragging the chicken rancher down with him.

Instantly his snakelike companion leaped back, his bony hands slapping for his six-shooters in a movement that had gun magic in it. But his gun barrels didn't clear their holsters. A single roar blasted out from twin .45s, and Hawkins' disreputable sombrero leaped from his head.

"I wouldn't do that, stranger," said a terse voice.

All eyes swung toward the restaurant. Standing in the doorway in a slight crouch was a tall, broad-shouldered man in puncher garb, his intensely blue eyes almost shooting sparks. In each fist he gripped a .45, and from the mouth of each a thin spiral of smoke was coiling upward.

There was a sharp silence while the members of the group stared at each other. Then Smiley Cole levered himself to his feet. At once one of the guns in the blue-eyed stranger's hands jerked to cover him.

"So yuh hit me, yuh dirty redskin!" Cole said softly to the immobile Indian. "I'm a-goin' to kill yuh for that, Injun."

"Ease off, Smiley," cautioned Hawkins, as the swelling sounds of shouts and footsteps heralded the approach of excited townsmen. Then he spoke to the blue-eyed stranger in the cafe doorway. "I reckon yuh got the drop, pardner, but I'd shore admire to know the name of the hombre who draws and horns in on a private palaver—from behind."

The stranger who had emerged from the cafe coolly dropped his guns back into leather, relaxing his fighting crouch, if not his vigilance. He spat a toothpick from his mouth as he responded evenly to that intentional insult.

"I figger you two skunks ought to know me so's yuh can recognize me should we meet up again—in front," he drawled. "The name's Wayne Morgan."

THE townsmen had almost reached the scene of the altercation now, and the first to arrive was a sad-faced gent in severe black—black derby, black string tie, black boots, and black suit, the coat of which was of Prince Albert cut and reached to his knees.

"Peace, peace!" he said in a sonorous voice.

He let his eyes flick from one to the other of the group, unable to single out the stranger most responsible. He compromised on the chicken rancher.

"Well, Mr. Castle," he demanded. "What is the disturbance?"

"These two strangers was botherin' me," Castle explained, "when this Indian interfered. I think there was goin' to be gunplay when that man yonder"—he indicated Wayne Morgan— "shot off the hat of this feller who says his name is Hawkins."

"Indeed," said the man in black gravely, turning to confront Slim Hawkins. "I am the Reverend Lewis. Tell me, please, what was the occasion of molesting Mr. Castle?"

Slim Hawkins squinted at the minister, then bent down to pick up his punctured sombrero.

"I don't reckon a sky pilot would have any business hornin' into this mess," he said sourly.

"I am also the peace marshal," added the Reverend Lewis gently, flipping up one lapel and revealing the badge of city marshal. "I don't guess you mind explaining to the law?"

Slim Hawkins' face was so ludicrous that Wayne Morgan couldn't repress a grin. Newly arrived in Sundown from the west, passing through on his way to Texas, this man who always represented himself to be a range wanderer suddenly found himself interested in folks and developments here.

Life was always playing tricks like this on the broad-shouldered Morgan. One

minute everything would be as drab and prosaic as a dozen miles of sun-scorched trail. The next, a little incident would become alive, peopled with characters who arrested attention. It all was part of a life which was not without interest and excitement, to say the least.

CHAPTER IV

New Citizen

WAYNE MORGAN was a man who would have arrested attention anywhere. He tried to be inconspicuous because it did not suit him for Wayne Morgan to be too prominent, but it was hard to keep people from mistaking him for a lawman or a detective.

He looked the part. However, nothing was further from the truth. Wayne Morgan was a man with a dozen prices on his head. For wherever Wayne Morgan was there, too, was that mysterious and unknown terror of the rangeland called the Masked Rider.

This black-cloaked Nemesis who rode a fiery black stallion named Midnight struck terror to the hearts of the lawless and the criminal. Himself branded as an outlaw, accredited with the foul deeds of other men, the Masked Rider was actually a benefactor of the oppressed and the helpless, a Robin Hood outlaw who roamed the trackless regions of the West. Accompanied only by a Yaqui Indian companion, Blue Hawk, who alone knew his double identity, his life's purpose was to avenge evil and bring wrongdoers to justice.

Ten minutes ago Sundown had simply been a little town on the trail where, separately, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk had stopped to get supplies and have one of their horses reshod. Now it was a deadly spot where two ruthless killers had jumped an old man named John Castle, and Blue Hawk's life had been threatened. And the town marshal was the town preacher!

Before Slim Hawkins could reply to the Reverend Lewis other men joined the group, among them George Reming and Chuck Daley. A window above the restaurant banged open and a man's curly brown head was stuck out of it. He took in the situation at a glance and hastily withdrew. A moment later he came down the stairs three at a time. Sam Wheeler knew trouble when he saw it.

Wheeler was a fair-complexioned man with wide-spaced gray eyes and a pugnacious jaw. He wore store clothes, his concession to cattle country being half-boots and a cream-colored Stetson. He was a Hoosier lawyer who fitted in well in this Western setting. Morgan placed his age as in the late twenties.

Pat Gordon, proprietor of the cafe, waddled to the door, to peer out at the growing crowd with sharp brown eyes. He was a fat man with a pendulous stomach covered by a greasy apron, and with a wide, humorous mouth covered by a walrus mustache.

"Hmmm, must be an important fracas," he murmured to Morgan. "Reming, Daley, Wheeler—and yonder comes old man Gregg from the bank. Yuh forgot to pay me for yore dinner, stranger. Four bits."

"I didn't finish," replied Morgan, smiling faintly. "I came out here for gunpowder dessert."

"Looks like yuh'll get it," Gordon commented. "Them's as tough a pair of men as I've seen in considerable time. Know 'em?"

"Never saw 'em before," Morgan said, without turning his head.

With Sam Wheeler's assistance, the preacher-marshal was getting an explanation of the affair.

"Shucks, we didn't mean nothin'," growled Slim Hawkins. "Cole and me are cattlemen. We thought we was doin' Castle a favor, offerin' to buy his place. No call for a ruckus a-tall."

"Who told you Castle's place was for sale?" demanded Wheeler.

"Nobody. Can't a feller offer to trade in real estate in this town without gettin' in a gunfight?"

Wheeler turned on the silent Indian who stood with folded arms.

"What you got to say to this, redskin? What's your name?"

"The name my people call me is unpronounceable, senor," was the polite response. "White men call me Blue Hawk. It was not the trade; it was the manner of force applied."

Smiley Cole turned his grin on the In-

dian, but he did not speak.

"It's bad medicine for a red man to interfere in the affairs of whites," said the Reverend Lewis gravely. "It generally means trouble."

"I know, senor," Blue Hawk said respectfully. "But I could not help interfering when I saw they were hurting the old man."

"Where do you fit in this?" Wheeler asked Morgan.

"It was just about like the Indian gent said," drawled Morgan. "I saw the play from inside the restaurant. I ran out in time to stop the slim jigger from ventilatin' the redskin."

Reming and Daley were eying the prospective buyers sharply. The Rocking R owner tightened his lips and exchanged a significant look with the lawyer.

"Bad medicine is right," said the dry, austere voice of Peter Gregg. "We don't hold with Indians butting in around Sundown."

"That's all right, pardner," Smiley Cole said in his soft, pleasant voice. "The Injun hit me, but that's all right."

"It's not all right," declared Gregg. "We don't allow trouble in this town. Mr. Lewis, you'd better lock the Indian up."

THE Reverend Lewis sighed and shrugged. "You heard what Mr. Gregg said, Blue Hawk."

"I heard," Blue Hawk answered, with profound equanimity. "You want to put me in jail for helping a helpless old man."

"It isn't that, Hawk," said Wheeler. "We want to prevent any further trouble between you and Cole while you both are in town. It's to protect you."

The Indian surveyed the lawyer without change of expression.

"Better come along peacefully," the Reverend Lewis said, stepping toward Blue Hawk. "It'll only be until Cole leaves town."

"Not so fast, Marshal," said Morgan in a pleasant but firm voice. "If yuh're not goin' to run in them two range tramps for molestin' Mr. Castle, yuh've no right to arrest the Indian. I'm the man who fired the only shots fired. Mebbe yuh ought to arrest me."

Lewis looked undecided, while Hawkins and Cole turned their attention to the speaker like a pair of alert bird hounds.

"I said to arrest the Indian," Peter Gregg said harshly.

"And I say, don't do it," Morgan said flatly. "There won't be any further trouble. I'm stayin' in town overnight myself—if yuh want to argue further with me. And these two real estate coots are gettin' out of town pronto. Ain't yuh, boys?"

"Not till I get blamed good and ready," informed Slim Hawkins, bridling.

"And yuh're ready now," Morgan said, his voice going hard. "That is, unless the marshal wants to lock yuh up."

"Don't reckon I can do that," opined the Reverend Lewis doubtfully. "Unless Mr. Castle wants to lodge a complaint."

"No, no!" spoke up the old chicken rancher hastily. "I don't want to cause any trouble. I just want to be let alone."

"Hit the breeze," said Morgan curtly, to the gun-hung strangers.

Slim Hawkins stared at Morgan coldly. His loosely hanging hands curled slightly into gun cups. He seemed on the verge of making a play. It was Cole, oddly enough, who broke it up.

"Come on, Slim," he purred pleasantly. "Le's drag. The odds is against us."

The two started along the street without another word.

"I guess that's the easiest way out," commented Sam Wheeler.

"Thank you, senor," Blue Hawk said gravely to Morgan and started back toward the blacksmith shop.

The Reverend Lewis strode after him, obviously bent on cautioning the redman about his conduct. John Castle called a grateful word after the Indian and would have spoken to Morgan but saw that the man was occupied. He turned toward the lawyer.

"I was on my way to see you, Sam," he said. "I need some advice."

"Sure, Castle," replied Wheeler heartily. "Come on up to my office. I wonder just how those saddle tramps happened to jump you."

Peter Gregg was confronting Morgan, fire in his eye.

"See here, young man," he began testily, "just who do you think you are, countermanding my orders and running things with a high hand?"

"The name's Morgan," said the ranger wanderer laconically. "I'll talk to yuh in

a minute. I called them men saddle tramps, Mr. Wheeler, but don't let my palaver fool yuh any. Range tramps don't have five hundred dollars in cash to offer for little spreads. I don't know who Hawkins and Cole are, but they ain't tramps. And they're dangerous men."

Wheeler looked at Morgan keenly. "I'd like to talk with you some more," he said. "You speak my language."

"I'll be around," Morgan assured him, then gave his attention to the angry banker. "Now, what's eatin' you, Brother Gregg? Yuh wanted things settled peacefully, didn't yuh? Well, ain't they?"

Peter Gregg, taken aback, opened and closed his mouth wordlessly. Finally he managed to speak.

"We don't hold with trouble-shooters hereabouts, Morgan," he said sternly. "Mr. Lewis is able to handle things satisfactorily in Sundown. Who are you and what's your business in town?"

"I've already told you who I am, and I haven't quite decided about my business here," replied Morgan coolly. "Any jobs open at yore bank? I'm right handy at countin' money."

"Then count me out four bits," suggested Pat Gordon, "before yuh forget it."

AS THE banker turned away with an angry snort, Morgan looked at the restaurant man squarely for the first time.

"I'll shore do it, old-timer, but how about drawin' me off a fresh cup of hot coffee before I settle up? And how come yuh ain't a mite cautious about dunnin' a man who's just bluffed off a couple of tough hombres?"

Pat Gordon laughed until all his fat shook. "If that was a bluff, mister, I don't ever want to see a man mean business. I know the difference between a salty cowhand and a pair of rattlesnakes when I see 'em. You'll do to ride the river with, Morgan. But I'm afraid you and the Injun has made a bad pair of enemies. Lucky yuh're a stranger, and just driftin' through."

They went on back into the cafe. Chuck Daley looked after them thoughtfully.

"Cole and Hawkins ain't the only dangerous men runnin' loose in town today," he told his boss. "That Morgan hairpin is a gunfighter from who laid the chunk."

"He looks like a U. S. marshal on the scout," Reming said slowly.

"Could be," admitted his foreman. "But if he ain't, mebbe we'd better nose around and find out who has reason to bring gunfighters to Sundown."

Reming gave him a startled look and, reading nothing in Daley's face, hastened to overtake and fall in step with the baffled banker. Daley shrugged and trailed him.

Inside the Eagle Cafe, Pat Gordon thawed out and waxed loquacious. For Wayne Morgan this proved better than a newspaper. The Eagle Cafe, it seemed, was local gossip headquarters, and Gordon knew the doings of the whole of El Verde Valley. Having decided he liked this blue-eyed, straight-shooting, straight-talking stranger, the restaurant man gave him all the grapevine news.

"Yuh sort of shut off the banker's water, too," he observed. "In fact, yuh done yore best to rile the whole kit and kaboodle of 'em. Gunpowder dessert, yuh called it."

"Not my best," disclaimed Morgan, grinning. "Yuh ought to see me on Sun-

[*Turn page*]

...ITS QUALITY
HITS THE SPOT!

day. But what else could I do? They were about to chuck that Injun into jail. The redskin came to the rescue of a pestered white man. Why shouldn't a white man come to the aid of the Injun? What I'm curious about is this Castle business."

"Oh, that," said Gordon, and he proceeded to give the history of the old chicken rancher, the layout of conditions and potentialities of the entire valley.

"What I don't savvy," Gordon concluded, "is how them two strange buzzards come to jump on the old man. I learned from Henderson that Castle wanted to borrow money from Gregg to pay off Brown. I learned from Charlie Hodges—he's the teller in the bank—that Castle didn't get it. But who told this Hawkins and Cole that he needed it? It wasn't the Government agent and it wasn't the bank teller."

"Mebbe they picked it up at Brown's general store," hazarded Morgan. "They headed in that direction."

Gordon considered this. "Could be," he agreed, nodding slowly. "But why would Ted Brown tell a pair of woolly strangers any of his business? He's close-mouthed, as well as close-handed. It shore would be plumb bad if a tough cattle outfit was to get the Castle place now. They could put the pressure on all them cattlemen in the south valley.

"I reckon yuh noticed George Reming and Chuck Daley outside there. That grinnin' Cole jigger did. If there'd been any more fireworks, Reming would of sided with you. He looked plumb sick when Hawkins claimed to be a cattleman tryin' to buy Castle's homestead. I tell yuh, Morgan, somethin' fishy is in the wind."

Morgan remembered the helpless, tragic look on John Castle's face. Like Gordon, he smelled a mystery, but feigned careless curiosity.

"Such as what?" he asked, gulping the last of his coffee.

"If Castle—or somebody—was to put in a toll-gate at Calico Pass I reckon there'd be a range war. Don't tell me that for three years everybody couldn't see that Castle could cause trouble if he was a-mind to. Just because he's a mild old man and has got a good-lookin' daughter ain't enough to stop smart cattlemen from protectin' their interests."

"Yuh say the cattlemen are doin' somethin' about organizin' with Sam Wheeler?"

GORDON snorted in disdain.

"The last few weeks," he said.

"Mebbe they've made an agreement with John Castle," Morgan suggested.

"Which don't explain Hawkins and Cole," Gordon pointed out grimly. "Them polecats drifted in from parts unknown. No sir, there's a mystery I can't figger out. There's a rattlesnake in the hoss corral, and he's spookin' the broncs. It looks like pore old Castle has put his stopper in the wrong jug."

"It looks to me like he sort of has the whiphand," said Morgan.

"And backs it up with what?" demanded Gordon. "A widowed gal and a seven-year-old granddaughter? If ever a man needed help, John Castle does. . . Yuh still owe me four bits."

Morgan spun a silver dollar across the counter with a neat snap. Deftly Gordon caught the coin on the back of his hand and tossed it, still spinning, into the air to snatch it with his cupped fingers and drop it into his till.

"Keep the change," Morgan said. "It's been worth it."

"Thanks," said Gordon. "If yuh ever come through Sundown again yuh got a meal on the house comin' to yuh. Where yuh headin' from here?"

"Down to the hotel by the depot to get a room."

"Huh? Then yuh meant it when you said you was stayin' overnight."

"Right now I'm thinkin' of stayin' through roundup. I reckon the station agent could use a good hand at the shippin' pens. So long."

"Hey!" Gordon called after him. "Try Ma Gimble's roomin' house across the tracks. It's cheaper."

The restaurant man watched Morgan out of sight, and scratched his head reflectively.

"Shippin' pen cowhand!" he snorted. "Now I wonder if I talked too much—or too little."

Gordon opened up his till, examined the silver dollar that he had gained from Morgan, and found the coin a good one by ringing it on the counter. Gordon didn't trust every customer.

CHAPTER V

Gathering Clouds

LATE in the afternoon a lone horseman rode southward out of town. A couple of miles before he came to the pass he pulled up his horse and keenly studied his back trail.

Nothing moved in the dust haze, so he turned from the trail toward a copse of trees bordering the banks of the creek. As he neared the spot he saw a faint spiral of smoke which indicated a campfire, and urged his mount onward through the underbrush with the air of a man who knew exactly where he was going—and why.

He did. Chuck Daley was as mad as a hornet. For a man who knew how to plan things, too many of his schemes were balked. He had run into the most exasperating series of incidents and hard luck over a period of time. Today's episode was the last straw.

He rode into a little clearing where he found the campfire, apparently deserted. He was not fooled.

"Come on out of the brush!" he called, as he flung himself from his horse and left the reins dangling.

The animal began cropping the short grass. Daley approached the fire and peered into the pot of mulligan which was cooking. He looked around impatiently. Then a twig cracked, and two men came into the clearing from where they had been hiding. Slim Hawkins and Smiley Cole.

"Wasn't shore it was you," explained Hawkins in his nasal tone. "Yuh'll stay for chow? Smiley knocked over a jackrabbit, and we're makin' stew."

"I didn't come here to eat," said Daley curtly. "I ain't got long. You two saddle bums shore fixed the deal up good. Of all the brainless idiots I ever saw, you two take the solid gold hoss shoes."

Smiley Cole lazily seated himself on the log before the fire, plucked a spear of grass and stuck it between his teeth. He took no umbrage at Daley's angry talk. Hawkins stirred the pot of stew with a stick, then squatted on his heels. Wrapping his long arms around his knees, he squinted up at the Rocking R foreman.

"If yuh mean the Castle deal, Chuck," he said slowly, "yuh're loco. We just had bad luck."

"Bad luck, my off boot!" snapped Daley. "What was the idea of jumpin' Castle right on the main street in front of everybody?"

"Yuh said to buy him out before he could raise any money on his chickens, and so—"

"Yuh stepped right in and messed things up," Daley finished savagely. "The boss'll be madder'n blazes for showin' our hand thisaway."

"How could I know that Injun was goin' to horn in?" Hawkins flared up slightly. "And how was we to know that salty jigger in the restaurant was goin' to buy chips in the game? I was of a mind to settle his hash right then."

"You leave Morgan to the boss. Yuh've still got to do the job yuh're bein' paid for."

"I'll settle with the Injun free," Smiley Cole said softly. "No redskin is goin' to lay a paw on me—and live to tell of it."

"Just what is all this ruckus about?" demanded Hawkins. "Whyn't the boss just buy up Castle's note from Brown and deal with Castle his ownself? A heap easier'n than to have us do it."

"You ain't bein' paid to make suggestions," growled Chuck. "Yore job is to carry out orders. The boss wants things done his way."

"He looks big enough to do things for hisself," Hawkins commented.

"Mebbe it ain't Reming," suggested Smiley Cole. "Mebbe it's that Brown feller Chuck's in cahoots with."

"Reming's the boss, Smiley," Hawkins grunted. "Chuck rides for him. Ain't that so, Chuck?"

"Don't worry about that, Hawkins. I hired yuh, and I'll see that yuh get paid. The boss leaves them details to me. Since yuh made a bobble of buyin' Castle out, now yuh got to do the other job."

"Meanin' what?" Hawkins asked.

"Run Castle off his place," Daley said tersely.

Hawkins squinted up at him. "That's rough stuff, Chuck. We ain't gettin' that kind o' money."

"Yuh ain't been asked to kill anybody, have yuh? Nobody's asked yuh to run any wet cattle, have they?"

Hawkins chuckled drily. "That's just it. Rustlin's more in our line. All I know about chickens is that they lay eggs for breakfast."

"And you cackle like one," Daley said coldly. "I've told you men the set-up. Now John Castle has got to be scared off. He's got to be ready to sell out the minute his deed to his place comes back to him. Yore job is to force him to sell to you—or to the boss."

"I still can't figger why Reming let things get so far along before takin' action," said Hawkins. "This country's made for men like us Smiley. Good grass, good cattle, dumb ranchers."

DALEY kicked a half-burned faggot deeper into the fire. He looked sharply from one to the other of his companions, and his eyes grew cold.

"Don't get any loco ideas about holdin' the Castle place after yuh get it," he said. "Yuh wouldn't last overnight tryin' to build a fence and toll-gate there to hold up the cattle raisers. That's Ted Brown's idea—or he thinks it is. Yuh're bein' paid to turn over the deed to the Castle place."

"Yuh don't have to talk so hard to us," remarked Smiley gently. "It ain't healthy. And yuh don't have to worry none. We ain't honin' to take root on any two-bit spread."

"If we can't talk Castle into sellin' out, and yuh don't want him killed," asked Hawkins moodily, "how are we to go about this business?"

Daley went to his horse and fished a small package from the saddle-bag. He tossed it at Hawkins' feet.

"Yuh'll begin by cripplin' him," he ordered. "To make shore he don't raise any money on his chickens, we'll get rid of the chickens. That's a package of poison. You know how to use it. And don't run any clumsy sandy with this job. That's all."

Daley returned to his mount and vaulted into the saddle. He rode out of the clearing without another word.

Cole smiled after him. "Daley's a cagey little feller, ain't he?" he said.

"Yeah." Hawkins carefully put the package of poison in his pocket. "So Daley's the party who put Brown up to that toll-gate idea. I'm beginnin' to think he's crooked, Smiley."

"This chicken poison deal don't make cattle sense," Cole grumbled. "It'll shore throw Castle right on Brown."

"On him—or at him," amended Hawkins. "I don't know what Daley's game is, but I bet he's aimin' to run a private blazer on his boss. He's too smart for a cowboy."

"He better not get too smart around me," Cole said lazily. "Let's eat. . . ."

Back in town, Peter Gregg stepped into Marshal Lewis' office in the court building. Usually the Reverend Lewis only prepared his Sunday sermons here. Today he was riffling through a file of circulars and want notices. He looked up somewhat apprehensively at the entrance of the banker.

"What are you doing, Lewis?" Gregg demanded. "Hunting for dodgers on the strangers?"

"Frankly, yes," admitted the preacher-marshal sheepishly.

"Go right ahead," said Gregg, waving a magnanimous hand. "You may find something. George Reming told me that Cole and Hawkins are outlaws."

Lewis looked uneasy. "But how would Reming know that?"

"I can't say, but I agree with him. However, I'm more interested in that other fellow—Morgan. He may be the leader of the band, and this was just a whizzer to make it seem they were enemies."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Lewis. "I'm a man of peace, Mr. Gregg. I don't even carry a firearm. How am I to cope with three desperadoes?"

"That is what I came here to talk to you about," said Gregg solemnly and sanctimoniously. "You are well aware that I don't hold with violence, but there are times when we have to fight fire with fire. I think it advisable for you to hire Morgan as your deputy marshal."

"What?" The Reverend Lewis was startled. "How does that fight fire with fire?"

"If Morgan is in with Cole and Hawkins, you'll have him where you can watch him. If that fracas was real, you'll have a fast gunslinger on your side to enforce law and order."

Lewis' expression indicated that he thought the remedy as deadly as the disease. "Maybe Morgan won't want the job," he suggested hopefully.

"Find out," Gregg ordered harshly.

"Well, if you say so," was the dubious assent.

"I say so," said Gregg, smiling thinly. "He asked me for a job, didn't he? This is the one I've selected for him. This cocksure poppinjay may prove more useful to me than he expected to. . . ."

AT THE general store, in the cool, gloomy depths of the warehouse across the siding, Sam Wheeler was talking with Ted Brown. The attorney came to the point with admirable bluntness for a lawyer.

"John Castle was in to see me today, Brown," he said significantly. "Shortly after he saw you."

Ted Brown's jaw muscles tightened slightly, then relaxed.

"That so?" he returned carelessly, his booming voice lowered to a rumbling croak. "What'd he want? To sell yuh some chickens?"

"He wanted advice. He told me about your proposition to put in a toll-gate on his place. Are you crazy, Brown?"

"Business is business, Wheeler—although this is none of yours."

"I represent the cattlemen of the south valley. They are my clients. I can't let such a thing be done after it has been called to my attention. Why, if Castle had listened to you, there'd have been a war started in El Verde Valley. You ought to have more sense than that."

"I got sense enough to mind my own business, which you don't seem to have. I'd advise you not to meddle with what don't concern you, Wheeler, and you'd better keep your trap shut, too."

The lawyer's eyes grew cold and his mouth hardened. But he went on in an even tone:

"When you couldn't crowd Castle into a deal, why did you hire a pair of bad strangers to try to buy him out under gun threat?"

"Huh?" Brown's voice boomed out loudly. "What's this?"

"Do you deny that you hired Cole and Hawkins to intimidate Castle into a forced sale?"

"Cole and Hawkins? I don't know any men named Cole and Hawkins. When did this happen?"

Wheeler told him. Brown's swarthy face scowled.

"Peter Gregg!" he said. "That's who it was. When I didn't rise to the bait he threw me through Castle to get me into his clutches, he figgered to beat me out another way, eh?"

Wheeler appeared uncertain, less sure of his ground.

"I don't think Mr. Gregg has to do business that way," he said. "I thought it was more like one of your capers. But you can't force Castle to fall in with your scheme, Brown. A toll-gate will only bring trouble."

"We'll see about that next Saturday," said Brown. "Good day, Wheeler."

"Wait a minute," said the lawyer. "If you're so set on your pound of flesh, I'll buy Castle's note from you and pay off his debt. What's the total figure?"

"Yuh'll go to the devil when yuh die, too," Brown said grimly. "Listen, Wheeler, yuh're spreadin' yoreself out too thin. Castle's debt to me ain't for sale. Take my advice and mind yore own cussed business. Savvy? Now clear out! I got work to do."

CHAPTER VI

The Masked Rider Appears

MORGAN ate supper that night at the Eagle Cafe in company with Sam Wheeler. The first thing the lawyer noticed was the badge pinned to the new citizen's vest.

"Well, this is a surprise!" he exclaimed. "So you're now deputy town marshal."

"That's right," admitted Morgan, grinning. "It's a sort of temporary job, I reckon. The Reverend Lewis wants me to keep that pair of polecats out of town, and me, I guess I want to learn a little more about preachin'."

"We are apt to need a gun marshal before long," Wheeler prophesied solemnly, and went on to tell Morgan about the toll-gate crisis and the new cattlemen's association. "By myself, I'm not going to be able to avert trouble if I can't protect Castle," he concluded. "George Reming is a hard man when he gets riled."

"Does he know about this toll-gate scheme?" Morgan inquired.

"Not yet. Of course, he realizes the

threat. I guess that's why he took an option on the section of land just north of the pass this afternoon."

"He did that?" Morgan's interest was unfeigned.

"Yes," Wheeler said, nodding. "The old Miller tract. Sewed it up at the bank before he left town."

"What good will that do him if Castle puts in a toll-gate?"

"He can build a dam across Calico Creek and impound the water in retaliation."

"That doesn't make sense," said Morgan, frowning.

"A lot of things hereabouts don't make sense," Wheeler said tersely. "I think you're going to have your hands full."

And, riding home from town through the dusk, George Reming had much the same opinion, but it was concerning himself. He halted his horse at the turn-off lane leading to the Castle house and sat there brooding for a long space. Then, without entering the lane, he rode on toward his own ranch, a grim and solitary figure of a man. . . .

It did not take Wayne Morgan forty-eight hours to learn that his duties as deputy peace marshal of Sundown hampered his movements considerably. The Reverend Lewis dogged his footsteps, and everything conspired to keep him in town during daylight hours and in plain sight.

He circulated among the citizens, to make as many acquaintances as he could. He talked with Henderson, Wheeler, Brown, Gregg—everybody from whom he might glean the least fragment about local conditions. But he was gradually realizing that he had made a mistake in accepting his job.

It was Blue Hawk who had to do the roving about the valley, studying the general terrain, and trying to pick up the threads of the mystery which centered in John Castle's homestead. Operating from their hideout back in the hills northeast of the Rocking R range, the Indian dropped out of sight and roamed the valley.

Blue Hawk, a highly intelligent Yaqui, had been educated in mission schools. He spoke English well and Spanish fluently. He was versed in Indian arts as well as in the ways and wiles of the white man. Most important of all, he had lived for years as the close companion of the man known only as the Masked Rider, a living symbol of democracy, free thought, and justice to the underdog.

The past of Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider, was obscured even from Blue Hawk, but the Indian knew that he had come from excellent stock, that he had a fine education, loved the West, so greatly that it was by preference that he spoke in the Western idiom, and had dedicated his life to the cause of freedom, liberty and equality. The Indian had come to do likewise, and the two men functioned as a team in perfect accord, with an understanding that often transcended speech. Neither could count the times the other had saved his life.

SO WHEN Wayne Morgan awoke in the pre-dawn dark of his room in Mrs. Gimble's lodging house on Saturday morning he was not surprised to find Blue Hawk silently approaching his bedside.

"Senor?" whispered the redman softly. "Senor" was Blue Hawk's only name for his companion of the trails. "Are you awake?"

"Good mornin', Hawk," Morgan responded, instantly alert. "Tryin' to catch me nappin'?"

"Rarely have I caught Senor napping," replied the Indian gravely. "I have come to report. The main reason John Castle has not been molested by the ranchers is because of his daughter. The Senora Libby is a magnet for all the swains of El Verde Valley. She blinds men to the dangers of a ranch in Calico Pass and enthralls them until they forget or dismiss such possibilities."

"You mean this woman is an enchantress?" asked Morgan curiously.

"Not like that, Senor," Blue Hawk said seriously. "From what I learn, she is a good, fine woman, but she is the reason men have not molested her father. Nobody wants to see her leave this country. All unattached men pay her court."

"Ah!" murmured Morgan, stretching and lacing his fingers behind his head. "I must see this feminine paragon. But shorely that is not the business that brought yuh into Sundown."

"No, Senor. I think I have made an important discovery, but I want you to investigate and form your own opinion. Will you come with me now? Midnight is

waiting just south of town."

Morgan arose and swiftly dressed in the gloom. Blue Hawk silently waited. Then, as quiet as a pair of shadows, they exited through the window and made their way to where the Indian's gray gelding waited.

"The Reverend Lewis is goin' to be right puzzled in the mornin' when he finds his deputy has disappeared," observed Morgan with a chuckle. "Gosh, Hawk, I feel like a bird out of a cage."

"A lion is never confined in a birdcage," said Blue Hawk. "Tell me, Senor, you see any more of Hawkins and Cole?"

"Not a sign," Morgan admitted, and proceeded to tell Hawk all that he had learned in town.

They rode double along back trails until they reached the thicket where the Masked Rider's magnificent coal-black stallion was hidden. The great horse whinnied softly and nuzzled his rider eagerly. Morgan laughed as he caressed the sleek head.

Then he opened the saddle roll behind the cantle of the saddle and withdrew a black cloak, a black sombrero and a black domino. Removing his Stetson, he donned the somber paraphernalia and was transformed into the night rider who had brought terror to the hearts of evil-doers.

"Lead on, Hawk," he said in the harsh, deep voice he automatically assumed with this character.

Sunrise found them on the trail at the north mouth of Calico Pass. The Indian drew rein.

"It is here, Senor," he told the Masked Rider, "that you start looking. There is peculiarity here, I think."

The Masked Rider surveyed the rugged rocks and talus on each side of the roaring creek. The vivid reds and browns and yellows of the shoulders of the pass made a striking contrast to the rest of the valley.

"*Uummm*—I see how Calico Pass got its name, Hawk," the Masked Rider commented.

"Yes," the Indian replied. "Reminds me of the copper hills of Arizona."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Masked Rider, glancing keenly at his companion. "Is that what you brought me out here to see?"

"Look around, Senor. Maybe you see something else. There is cleft in west wall near middle of pass."

The Masked Rider studied the nearer side of the cut.

"Box canyon, or just a fault?"

"Box canyon," said Blue Hawk. "Runs back into mountain and forks twice before it pinches out. Blind hole. Not good hideout for horseman. Man on foot can climb out back ends onto mountainside."

The Marked Rider eyed the Indian, reading more than the words told.

"All right, we'll have a look. Get along, Midnight."

He kneed the great horse off the trail and the magnificent animal daintily picked his way over the broken ground to the sheer wall of the cut. Silently Blue Hawk followed on his gray. When they reached the entrance of the little canyon, a crevice scarcely four feet wide, Midnight snorted inquiringly, then at the gentle urging of his rider walked into the small ravine.

"Too rough to go far on horses, Senor," advised Blue Hawk from behind. "Best we leave mounts around bend at first fork."

ABOUT fifty feet in they came to the first forking of the sloping ravine, and the Masked Rider dismounted.

"Midnight," he said, "you and the gray stay here and watch the trail."

On foot the two men penetrated deeper into the dry wash.

"Right fork, Senor," the Indian directed, and the Masked Rider swerved accordingly. "Then to left."

The little canyon narrowed, pinching out as they advanced. The way became gloomier as they reached the shadow of a sheer, rocky wall on the south side. The Masked Rider looked beyond keenly. It was a blind canyon, all right. Only an active man could have scaled the crumbling ledges and gained the mountainside above. He brought his attention back to the clifflike south wall.

This presented a bare stone face, as though Vulcan had chopped down into the hillside with an enormous cleaver. On the wall were several odd splotches of reddish color about the height of a man's chest, none of them out of reach from the floor of the canyon. One of these had recently been picked at, dug away to expose a round opening not unlike a worm-hole in old wood.

Curiously the Masked Rider placed his finger on the dried splotch and discovered that it was a hardend dirt mixture from

the floor of the canyon which had been smeared on the rock wall, obviously to hide the hole markings. He glanced swiftly at the Indian.

"I dug that one open, Senor," said Blue Hawk. "I wondered why somebody play dirt dauber here. What you think?"

Without speaking, the Masked Rider drew out his pocket knife and attacked another of the dried mud splotches. In a moment he had laid bare one more of the queer little holes.

"Drill marks," he observed. "Blue Hawk, somebody's been prospectin' in here, and then clumsily covered up his marks. Why?"

"Can you say when, Senor?"

"I would say not more than a year or two ago. Mebbe less than a year."

He bent closer to examine the drill hole. And in that instant there sounded the vicious whine of a bullet which smacked glancingly against the rock wall between the two men and ricocheted on down the canyon. On its heels sounded the slightly echoing *cr-r-rack* of a rifle. If the Masked Rider had not moved at that instant the slug would have passed squarely through his head.

Instinctively both men leaped against the opposite wall.

There was scant protection. The Masked Rider jerked his guns and slammed two shots wildly up the canyon in the hope of frightening his foe. But suddenly he realized that if the hiding bushwhacker didn't hear the whine of lead, then the man would know that he had been undetected. So the Masked Rider searched with his eyes for some escape while he awaited the blow of a killer's bullet.

"We must flee down the canyon," Blue Hawk said excitedly, trying to find the foe.

"Where did the shot come from?"

"Shot came from up on mountainside," Blue Hawk grunted, as they edged their way back around the first bend in the canyon.

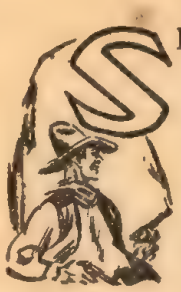
"And the jasper meant business," added the Masked Rider drily. "Think we might flush him out, Hawk? This is the middle canyon. You take the left and I'll take the right. We'll pinch him between us."

"We try, Senor. I'll meet you up on hillside."

"Right," said the Masked Rider. "About three hundred yards, I'd reckon."

CHAPTER VII

Fowl Play



SEPARATING, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk each made his way silently up the two outer ravines. No sound broke the stillness for the next half hour as the sun continued to rise and send slanting rays down into the death-trap. Nothing seemed to move, either in canyon or on mountain slope.

Then the quiet was ended by the muted roar of a mountain lion on the brush-covered slope above. It was answered from a point to the right. The approximate point from which the sniping shot had been fired was midway between.

As if by magic, the Masked Rider and the Indian appeared and converged rapidly on a clump of shrubbery. A grim and formidable pair, the man in somber black gripping two six-shooters, the Indian gripping the haft of a wicked-looking hunting knife.

The only thing they flushed was a lizard. The little reptile slithered out of the brush and scampered away in fright. Nothing else remained in the clump of brush. The drygulcher had discreetly decamped, obviously the moment he realized he had missed his shot.

A trifle chagrinned, the Masked Rider and the Indian looked at each other. Then they cast quickly around for signs. Blue Hawk discovered the imprint of cowboy boots leading over the ridge. In the brush the Masked Rider found marks where the drygulcher had rested the butt of his gun on the ground, and an empty .30-30 cartridge shell.

"A wary ambusher, Senor," commented the Indian. "Shall I trail him?"

"Not now, Hawk," said the Masked Rider, deep in thought.

"Whoever it was saw us both," protested the Indian. "He will know Masked Rider is in this part of country and that Blue Hawk is friendly with him. Bad medicine, especially if drygulcher is that man named Smiley Cole."

"Whoever it was won't tell the Law, Hawk," the masked man said confidently. "Yuh worried about Cole?"

BLUE HAWK

Blue Hawk grunted his disdain. "Only worried for you, Senor. That bullet was meant for you."

"Not for the Masked Rider, Hawk, but because I was lookin' at somethin' he didn't want disturbed. I think we can catch him by trailin' in a different fashion. Remember I told yuh George Reming has taken an option on the land just north of Calico Pass? John Castle owns the land just south of the pass. This ground belongs to one or the other of 'em."

"The canyon down there," said Blue Hawk, nodding toward it, "is on the Castle side, I think."

"Yes. So it's about time to pay a visit to Brother Castle."

"John Castle does not wear cowboy boots," pointed out Blue Hawk.

"Not usually," the Masked Rider qualified with grim significance.

"What you think, Senor, about those drill marks?" asked the Yaqui.

"The same thing you do, Hawk," the man in the mask told him positively. "Yuh've done good work. Things are slowly beginnin' to make sense to me. But there's still a lot to be put together. I'll go to the Castle place alone and see what I can find out there."

They made their way down the rugged hillside to the box canyon. Leaving Blue Hawk at the mouth, the Masked Rider mounted his coal-black stallion and rode through the pass.

The Castle spread looked peaceful and homelike to him as he rode along the fenced lane up to the picket gate of the door yard. He gazed with approval at the signs of industry and care the old chicken rancher had lavished on the place, reflecting sadly how such an existence was not for him, a Robin Hood outlaw. He had renounced such things forever when he had chosen the course of champion for the underdog. A man who lived by the code of the six-gun could never hope to enjoy the serenity of a placid life.

Shrugging aside his melancholy thoughts, he checked Midnight at the gate and considered the house carefully, a frown gathering on his forehead beneath the black mask. There was no evidence of anyone stirring around the place and it was nearly mid-morning. The stillness seemed strange. He listened intently for sounds he felt he should hear. And suddenly he knew what they were. There should be chicken noises, and there was not a single chirp or cluck or crow.

DROPPING his bridle reins, he stepped down and opened the gate. The barn door gaped wide, and there was no sign of Castle's team or buckboard. The place seemed utterly deserted. If that had been John Castle up on the mountain with a rifle, he might not have had time to get home before the Masked Rider arrived. But where was the old man's daughter and grandchild?

Midnight snorted sharply, pricking up his ears. The front door of the house opened abruptly, and a woman appeared on the threshold, a double-barreled shotgun in her hands. The muzzle was pointed directly at the Masked Rider, and the hammers were both eared back at full cock.

"Take one more step," she warned in a flat voice, "and I'll kill you!"

The Masked Rider froze in his tracks. He surveyed the woman keenly. She was young, she was pretty, and her eyes were red from weeping. But none of this impeded the businesslike manner with which she handled the shotgun.

"I reckon you must be John Castle's daughter," the Masked Rider said softly.

"I am," she said firmly. "Who are you? What do you want? The idea of a masked bandit coming right up to a body's home in broad daylight!"

"It's true I'm masked, ma'am," he agreed solemnly, "but I'm not a bandit. Some folks call me the Masked Rider."

Libby Martin started slightly, but the gun muzzle did not waver. Few indeed were the people of frontier country who had not heard of this almost mythical character who rode the range in the interest of the helpless and oppressed. But the frontier people also knew that many desperadoes capitalized on the Robin Hood outlaw's reputation, assuming his identity on occasion and committing vicious crimes. That had continued until now the innocent Masked Rider was badly wanted by law officers in a dozen states and territories.

"I don't believe you," Libby Martin said, but there was indecision in her voice.

"I have no proof I can show yuh, ma'am," he said, "unless yuh'll believe me when yuh look at my hoss. There is only one Midnight."

Her eyes flicked beyond him to the stallion at the fence, came back quickly. The shotgun sagged imperceptibly.

"I can hardly believe you," she said in a warmer voice, "after—after—".

"After what, ma'am?" he asked gently.

"After what has just happened to us," she said wearily, and her voice broke.

He made a step forward, and the gun barrel came up sharply and steadied on his chest. He made a little gesture.

"Please, Mrs. Martin," he said persuasively. "I've come to talk to yore father. Won't yuh call him?"

"He—he isn't here," the young woman admitted, reluctantly.

"He took his rifle and went hunting mebbe?"

"He doesn't own a rifle, but he's gone hunting all right. He's gone to town." A sob escaped her, and this time she definitely lowered the gun.

"Better lower the hammers," he suggested. "Shotguns are dangerous weapons."

Obediently she did so, and he calmly approached the house.

"What happened?" he demanded gravely. "Why did yore father go to town?"

"Our—our chickens," she said. "Somebody has poisoned our entire flock."

"Tell me about it," he urged.

"Come," she answered. "I'll show you."

He followed her through the house and out into the back yard, gratified to be taken now on trust. His faint smile somehow relieved the grimness of his garb. And then his lips grew firm and hard at what he saw.

Dead chickens were scattered all over the yard. The chicken-run was literally covered with them. And in the foreground lay a plump rooster, claws lifted to the sky as though in mute protest at being stricken down in his prime. Beside the dead cock a little girl was on her knees, sobbing bitterly.

The mother gave a little cry and rushed out to cradle the child in her arms.

"There, there, darling, don't cry," she soothed. "Grampa will get you another rooster."

"B-but it won't be—be Cleveland," sobbed the little girl. "Mommy, why did Cleveland have to die?"

LIBBY MARTIN looked up at the Masked Rider over the little pigtailed head. Her lovely brown eyes were

filled with tears as she bit her lips to keep them from trembling. The man's heart ached for both of them.

He dropped to one knee opposite them.

"I am mighty sorry, little one," he said gently. "Yuh loved Cleveland a heap, didn't yuh?"

Susan stopped her sobbing and looked up at the sound of the strange voice which, in spite of its depth, held a tender note. Her eyes went wide in fascination at sight of the black cloak and black mask. But she was not frightened.

"He—he was the only pet I had," she said.

The Masked Rider reached out and felt of the bird's body. It was still warm; the crop was full of grain. The child began crying again, softly this time.

"Listen, honey," he said, choosing his words carefully. "All things that live must die sometime—some sooner, some later. A great poet once put it this way:

> 'Life is real, life is earnest,
> And the grave is not its goal;
> Dust thou art to dust returneth
> Was not spoken of the soul.'

So mebbe Cleveland is not dead. Probably he's waitin' for you in the Great Yonder, crowin' somewheres, beyond the horizon."

"You mean—Cleveland's gone to heaven?" asked the wide-eyed Susan.

"Just that," he told her gravely.

The child stared at him for a long moment. Then she said: "I believe you."

"That's good," the masked man said gently. "Now, suppose we bury his body. We'll accord him a warrior's funeral. Your mommy and I will help you. Where's a spade, ma'am? First, I'll be the grave digger."

A faint interest showed through the clouds on Susan's tear-stained face. This was sad, but it was the only thing they could do for Cleveland now.

The funeral took fully a quarter of an hour, with both the masked man and Susan's mother participating gravely. The dead rooster was buried under a young peach tree at Susan's direction. The Masked Rider placed a head marker there out of a piece of fence paling on which the facts pertaining to Cleveland's short existence were duly recorded with indelible pencil. Then he wove a wreath for the grave of peach twigs and leaves. It was Susan herself who said a simple little prayer for Cleveland.

The result was that the Masked Rider helped the child through her sharpest grief. Libby Martin stood there, almost in wonder, and stared at his well-shaped head, noting the way his rather long dark hair curled at the back of his neck. He raised his head, caught her looking at him, and he smiled at her encouragingly. She colored slightly and looked swiftly away.

"I think this was a good funeral," he said, replacing his hat. "And for as long as folks have been havin' 'em, all over the world, no matter whether they're white folks, or black, or yellow or red, there's always funeral meats afterward."

"What's that?" Susan demanded.

"That's when everybody has somethin' to eat and drink. For life must go on for the rest of us." He glanced at Libby Martin. "Ma'am, if yuh'll fix some bread and butter for us, I'll come in directly and we'll eat and drink somethin' in memory of Cleveland."

He motioned her toward the house with his head, and Libby understood. Taking Susan by the hand, she went into the kitchen, the child contentedly trotting along beside her.

CHAPTER VIII

Killing

INSTANTLY the Masked Rider turned and entered the chicken-run. He spent several minutes surveying the feeding troughs, the water supply, the dead hens, looking for any sort of clue he could find. There was little grain left. All of the chickens had full crops.

He noted the whitish incrustation on the grain still visible and the metallic, garlicky odor that lingered. When he returned to the house his face was grim.

Libby Martin had set places for them all at the kitchen table. She was buttering some home-made bread and pouring milk. Gratefully the Masked Rider sat down and joined in the feast.

"It's been a mighty long time since I had any bread like this," he praised as he ate.

"Thank you," the woman murmured.

"Did you discover anything out there?"

"Only the grain was poisoned," he answered. "The water supply is all right. Grain was soaked in—"

"Arsenic," she said quickly. "I know."

"How did yuh know?" he asked.

"We used to use it back in Ohio to kill trees and dehorn milk cows. Father said it was probably used out here to kill wild animals. You can get it at Brown's store in Sundown."

"That's what Mr. Castle went to town to investigate?"

Libby's face became drawn and anxious, as though remembering something she had been pushing to the back of her mind.

"Father was in a terrible rage when he went out this morning and found the flock dead," she said worriedly. "He took his—his six-shooter and went to town. He thinks it was Mr. Brown himself who poisoned the chickens." She told him about the toll-gate proposition Brown had made to Castle. "Father went to town to have it out with Brown," she finished. "I'm afraid—" She broke off, glancing at Susan.

The Masked Rider stood up and put on his hat. "I've spent too much time here," he said briefly. "I must go now. I'm sorry. Susan, the next time I come I'll bring yuh another pet. How'd yuh like to have a puppy, or a kitten?"

"I'd love it!" cried the little girl, her eyes shining.

"Then that's a promise," said the masked man. "And to you, ma'am, I promise that the person who has done this thing here will be punished. *Adios.*"

He hurried out of the house. Mother and daughter looked after him. Then they followed to the front door to watch him ride off on the glossy black stallion, riding northward toward Sundown as though the hounds of Hades were at his heels.

"I like him, Mommy," said Susan. "What's his name?"

Libby Martin sighed, but somehow her heart was lighter as she caressed her daughter's head.

"I wish I knew, darling."

Arriving at the cleft in the wall of Calico Pass, the Masked Rider hastily told Blue Hawk what he had just learned. All the while he was stripping himself of the black trappings and returning them to the cantle roll of his saddle. Cuffing his Stetson back into shape, he clapped it on his head and once more became Wayne Morgan, the new deputy peace marshal of Sundown.

"I'll ride the gray, Hawk," he finished. "I'm afraid something's brewin' up in town. You take Midnight, and I'll meet yuh as soon as possible where yuh had the gray staked out this mornin'."

The Indian nodded. "I shall hunt for pet for little girl, Senor."

Wayne Morgan rode at a gallop along the open trail to town. It had been a fruitful morning, and he did not regret one second of the time spent, but he had an uneasy feeling that he should have remained in town on this of all mornings. After seeing Libby and Susan Martin, he could understand John Castle's righteous wrath, and he was praying that he would not arrive in Sundown too late to prevent a tragedy.

The moment he galloped onto the main street he sensed that something was astir. Men stood in little groups, talking. In front of Brown's Emporium and in front of the undertaking parlor clusters of people were gathered. Few women were in evidence. There was another knot of men outside the adobe jail haranguing Marshal Lewis who looked as heckled and badgered as a wet hen. Of the other important men of town—Gregg, Wheeler, Brown, Henderson—there was no sign.

MORGAN halted his lathered mount at the jail hitching rail and walked quickly over to join the group around Lewis.

"About time you were showing up," greeted the marshal sourly, but his face showed his relief. "Where you been all morning? Where'd you get that horse? Your own hammerhead roan is still in the stable."

"I borrowed him, Marshal," Morgan answered briefly, as he glanced sharply around. "What's goin' on?"

"If you'd been here tending to your duties you'd have seen for yourself," the marshal said lugubriously. "This is most distressful."

"What is?" demanded Morgan. "Out with it, man."

"Ted Brown's dead," answered one of the men in the group. "Killed in cold blood."

"Shot three times in the back this morn-

in'," said another. "Tolliver's got his carcass over at the undertakin' parlor now."

"And Marshal Lewis has got the killer already in the jug."

The Reverend Lewis raised a hand in remonstrance.

"Now, now, boys, judge not, lest ye be judged. You know a man is considered innocent until he's proved guilty."

"Who yuh got in jail, Marshal?" asked Morgan casually, but he experienced a sinking feeling.

"John Castle," said Lewis reluctantly. "I'm afraid it's an open and shut case, Morgan. The way I got it from the store clerk, Castle came driving into town like a madman just after the store opened—about eight o'clock—and went rushing into the back room to see Brown with blood in his eye. McGinnis, the clerk, didn't think of stopping him, didn't even know he was armed. A minute later he heard three shots. McGinnis ran back toward the office and just as he reached the partition Castle came staggering out of Brown's office, dazed. McGinnis looked in and saw Brown on the floor, blood on the back of his coat.

"McGinnis was rattled, but he talked Castle into sitting down in the front of the store, then hailed a man on the street to come for me. I couldn't get any sense out of Castle, so I had to lock him up. And I haven't been able to do any investigating because you weren't around to leave on guard here at the jail. Now you take over here, and I'll go ask some questions about this business."

"Wait a minute, Marshal," said Morgan, thinking swiftly. "Yuh say that happened around eight o'clock this mornin'? And it's nearly noon now. Castle has had time to quiet down some. Let's both go in and talk to him before doin' any scoutin' around."

Lewis allowed himself to be persuaded. The curious hangers-on started to follow, but Morgan stopped them.

"Grub time, men," he said. "Better go put on the feed-bag."

Unwillingly, reluctantly they milled around, one or two of them sullen about this curt dismissal. Then somebody laughed, and the group melted away. Locking the door behind him, Morgan followed the marshal to the cell where John Castle was confined.

The elderly chicken rancher sat on his bunk, slumped down in stricken fashion, gazing without sight at the dingy wall opposite him. He did not stir as Marshal Lewis unlocked his cell door. An empty gun holster was still strapped around Castle's waist in an awkward fashion.

"That was the way he wore his gun," commented Lewis. "Butt smack in front of his stomach. Worse than any tenderfoot I ever saw."

"Where's the gun?" Morgan asked.

"In the front office. Not a shot fired out of it."

"What? Then how—"

"Brown's gun was on the floor behind him. Castle just walked up behind him, jerked Brown's gun out of its holster, and shot the storekeeper in the back with his own six-shooter. Blind mad about something, he probably forgot he was wearing a gun himself. Brown's gun had been fired three times."

Morgan entered the cell, stood before the prisoner, and waited in silence. At last the old man looked up dully. Recognition of the tall, sinewy man dawned so gradually in his eyes that Morgan wasn't sure the chicken rancher placed him at all.

"Mr. Castle," he said with deliberation, "do yuh remember me?"

"Yes," replied the old man, after considerable pause. "Yuh're the man who saved me and the Indian from violence the other day."

"That's right.. And I want to help yuh now. Do yuh feel well enough to talk to me about what happened in town this mornin'?"

"This mornin'?" repeated Castle stupidly.

"That's the way he's been ever since I arrested him," Lewis said from the doorway. "You won't get anything out of him. I think the shock affected his mind."

WAYNE MORGAN made a silencing gesture and went on speaking to the prisoner.

"Yes, this mornin', Mr. Castle. About what happened at Ted Brown's store. I'll help yuh. Yuh went out this mornin' to feed yore chickens and found 'em all dead. Yuh saw they'd been poisoned with arsenic, and figgered Ted Brown had done it to force yuh into that toll-gate proposition he had put to yuh. Rightfully angry,

yuh came to town for a showdown with Brown."

"What's all this?" gasped the astonished marshal. "I didn't know anything about any chickens, or toll-gates."

"Be quiet!" snapped Morgan, without turning his head. "Believe me, Mr. Castle," he went on to the old man, "I'm yore friend and I want to help yuh. But yuh've got to help me. Think hard now. Just what happened when yuh went in to see Ted Brown at eight o'clock this mornin'?"

The old man began trembling all over as though he had the ague. His face started working and he swallowed convulsively.

"That's right!" he burst out. "I figgered Brown was tryin' to force my hand. I came to town to make him pay off for what he'd done. I was goin' to kill him if he didn't. I try to be a God-fearin' man, but I had killin' in my heart this mornin'."

"So you went on into Brown's office," Morgan led him along. "Just exactly what happened then?"

John Castle stared at Morgan's face painfully, obviously groping to recall. Then he groaned and covered his face with his gnarled old hands.

"Remorse," remarked Marshal Lewis. "'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.'"

Morgan placed his hand comfortingly on the old man's bowed shoulder.

"Tell me what happened, Mr. Castle," he urged in a gentle voice.

Castle looked up. He shuddered.

"Nothin' happened," was his surprising response. "I went there to kill Brown, but I was too late. He was already dead. He was layin' on the floor on his face, the back of his shirt wet with blood."

"Yuh mean yuh have no recollection of pullin' Brown's gun and firin' three shots into his body?"

"I didn't do it," whispered the old man. "I never even said a word to him. I didn't even touch my gun."

"Not yore gun. His gun."

"There wasn't any gun."

"Brown's gun was on the floor in the middle of the room when I got there," said Marshal Lewis. "Three shots had been fired from it."

"There wasn't any gun," repeated Castle stubbornly. "Leastways, I didn't see any."

"How about the three shots that McGinnis heard fired?" Morgan asked.

"I don't know," said Castle dumbly. "I didn't hear any. I didn't see anything but Brown's body. I guess I was stunned. I know I was sick all over. I—I don't remember anything else until I found myself locked up in here. Oh, Libby! Susan! What are you children goin' to do now?"

He covered his face with his hands and stifled a cry of anguish.

CHAPTER IX

Three Shots—Six Bullet Holes

PITYINGLY, Marshal Lewis looked at his prisoner, then glanced at his deputy.

"Too bad," he remarked. "I'm mighty sorry, but his denial don't mean anything, Morgan."

"Not of itself," said Morgan. "But it'll bear lookin' into. I wonder if anybody else heard them shots."

"I'll go talk to McGinnis again," announced Lewis. "But he told a pretty straight story."

"I'll talk to McGinnis," said Morgan. "You stay here, Marshal, till I come back."

Over the marshal's protest he walked out of the cell and out of the jailhouse. His first stop was at the undertaking parlor.

"Let me see Brown's body, Tolliver," he said to the undertaker.

Tolliver, a thin-faced little man with watery eyes, led him to the back room where Morgan examined the body of the general store owner. Brown had been shot three times in the back all right.

"Two bullets still in him," Tolliver explained. "Both fatal. One slug went clean through him without touchin' a bone, I reckon. I doubt if Ted knew what hit him. Surprisin' about old John Castle, ain't it? I'd never of picked him out as a killer,"

"Neither would I," agreed Morgan. "Wish yuh hadn't already washed these wounds. What was the condition of the blood, can yuh say?"

"Red and wet. Anything unusual about that?"

"I mean, how fresh was it? How soon did yuh get to the body?"

"It wasn't flowin', if that's what yuh mean," stated Tolliver, scratching his chin

reflectively. "I got there right after the Reverend Lewis—about eight-thirty, I'd guess."

"How long had Brown been dead, would yuh say? I mean, could he have been dead before eight o'clock?"

Tolliver squinted his watery eyes, cocked his head to one side, and looked at Morgan sharply.

"I don't know what you're tryin' to get at, Morgan, but Brown hadn't been dead overlong. It was a fresh kill. I ain't no medical genius, but I've seen too many dead folks to be fooled much."

"I'm shore of that, Tolliver, but what I want to know is if Brown could have been killed mebbe an hour or more before Castle got there."

"Well, mebbe," the undertaker said cautiously. "But not more'n that. An hour at the outside. But that's foolish talk. Didn't McGinnis hear the shots and catch Castle red-handed?"

"So I've been told. Thanks, anyway, for yore information."

Morgan left the puzzled undertaker and went to the general store. He had definitely learned one thing. The man who had killed Ted Brown—whether Castle or someone else—could not possibly have been the drygulcher who had shot at the Masked Rider in Calico Pass. So if Castle were not guilty, there were two deadly killers at large. Were they Smiley Cole and Slim Hawkins?

Pat McGinnis, head clerk for the late Theodore Brown, was as Irish as his name, and with as open and sunny a countenance as a white-faced Hereford calf. Two other clerks were on duty, for business was going on at the Emporium despite the sudden death of the owner, since no instructions had been given to close up the place. Trading was not brisk, though, when Morgan walked in, for everybody there was too full of talk and speculation about the shooting for ordinary business.

Morgan's entrance was the signal for conversation to die down, and the customers followed him curiously with their eyes. He nodded to several and drew McGinnis off to one side.

"Tell me what happened this mornin', Mac," he invited. "Marshal Lewis and I are just checking up."

McGinnis nodded, and obliged volubly. "I was puttin' up some fresh stock in the shelves," he said. "Nobody was here but Ted and me that early, when John Castle came stridin' in. Ted was in the office."

"What time did Brown get here?" asked Morgan.

"He's nearly always here," said McGinnis. "He sleeps here. Has a room behind his office."

"I see. Did you speak to him this mornin' before Castle got here?"

THE head clerk looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Come to think of it, I didn't," he said. "He generally works on his books early in the mornin' and I just supposed he was doin' that in his office. Anyway, I spoke to Castle, but he didn't hardly answer—just kept walkin' toward the back. Which was all right, of course. Shure and Ted had lots of talks with customers in his office, many times with Castle. I didn't notice anything out of the way except that Castle was kind of grumpy and out of sorts.

"I was goin' on with my stockin' when the shots came—three of 'em, spaced deliberate—sort of muffled because the door was closed. While I was tryin' to think what could of happened and what I should do, begorra, the door opened and John Castle came staggerin' out of the office like he was tipsy. It was then I seen his gun for the first time."

"He was carryin' it?"

"Oh, no. He had a gun holster on crooked, and I saw the butt of his six-gun stickin' up in the middle right where his coat parted. I ran toward him to ask what was the matter, and he didn't seem to hear me at all. He brushed past me without seein' me and headed for the front of the store. I took one peek in the office and saw Ted stretched out on the floor, blood all over his back, the smell of gunpowder heavy in the air."

"The gun?" Morgan cut in. "Where was it?"

"I didn't notice any gun, I was that excited," said Mc Ginnis. "I only saw it when Marshal Lewis picked it up off the floor later. I followed back after Castle, and did I oil up the old blarney when I talked him into sittin' down and waitin' for the marshal! I called out to a teamster in front and sent him after Lewis. Ben Bogart it was. Mother of Pete, what

a mornin'!"

"Show me Brown's office," suggested Morgan.

The clerk led the way toward the rear. Morgan noted the partition which cut off the front half of the store from the rear. Just behind this partition, which extended clear to the ceiling, was another partition extending rearward at right angles to the first for about twenty feet. In this partition there were two doors.

The rest of the huge building was given over to storage. At the very rear double doors opened on the railroad spur, beyond which was the feed warehouse. Behind the partition was a huge door which opened on the loading dock.

"Any way out of here except through these two doors?" asked Morgan.

"Nope," said McGinnis. "But there's a connectin' door between the two." He unlocked and opened the office door. "Lewis told me to keep things locked up," he apologized.

"That's right," said Morgan, glancing keenly about.

Light was admitted through a wide but dusty window. The usual battered furniture of a general store office was in evidence. There was no sign of a struggle of any sort, only a little pool of blood near the middle of the floor. A bucket of sawdust beside it.

"I was goin' to clean that up," said McGinnis, "but Lewis said leave it be, that the coroner's jury might want to see things as they was."

Mindful of what the undertaker had said about one bullet passing clear through Brown's body, Morgan looked around for signs of a bullet-hole. He found it in the side of the battered old desk, an indication that Brown had been facing or going toward the desk when he was shot. It was evident that he had been killed by a man he trusted, or he would not have turned his back.

Unless Castle had opened the door without warning. But Brown had been shot with his own gun. Or had he? Anyway, Castle would certainly have started an argument before shooting, and this didn't indicate such a state of affairs.

"Did yuh hear any talk?" Morgan asked as he continued to let his eyes rove over the entire office.

"Not a word," said McGinnis. "But then I wouldn't have heard anything unless they'd been yellin' at each other."

Morgan went to the connecting door which stood half-open and looked into the bedroom. Typical bachelor quarters, bed unmade. Brown's coat hung over a chair beside the bed. Otherwise, the merchant had been fully dressed.

Morgan started over to try the other door which opened into the rear of the building.

"It's locked," informed McGinnis. "I locked it this mornin'."

"Brown didn't keep it locked?"

"Oh, no—only his office and safe."

MORGAN returned to the office. He frowned, his eyes still moving. In view of Castle's story he had a feeling that something was definitely off-color about the set-up, but couldn't figure out what it was.

And then he happened to raise his gaze to the ceiling. There above the desk in the opposite corner he saw three fresh scars with a dark pit in the center of each. He knew what they were without examination, although he marked them down for future investigation.

"Who's been gun-practisin' in here lately?" he asked McGinnis.

At the man's puzzled expression, he pointed toward the ceiling at the corner. The clerk's jaw dropped in surprise.

"I don't know," he murmured. "I never saw them holes before."

"Three holes in Brown and three in the ceilin'," Morgan said grimly. "That makes six shots."

"No," denied McGinnis. "There was only three shots. I heard 'em plain. Ben Bogart heard 'em, too. When I told him to run for the marshal he said he thought he'd heard three gunshots hisself."

"The back doors are open," said Morgan. "Were they open when yuh came to work this mornin'?"

"The place was locked up tighter'n a drum," declared McGinnis. "I opened the back to ventilate the store after Tolliver took Ted's body away."

"Come on," said Morgan. He led the way out of the office and around the rear of the partitioned section toward the left side of the building.

"How about this side door?" he asked.

"Still locked," said McGinnis.

CHAPTER X

Mob Threat

CURIOUSLY, Morgan walked over to the side door. Without touching it, he pointed silently to the hasp. The door was rolled shut, but the metal pin was not in the hook, and the hasp was folded back. Anybody strong enough to roll the door could have entered or left at will.

McGinnis gasped. "But—but likely one of the other clerks went out on the loadin' dock this mornin'," he protested.

"And left the door closed like this?"

Dumbly McGinnis shook his head. "I don't understand about them six shots either," he said mournfully. "Shure, and I must be crazy in the head today."

"Nope, Mac, I think yuh're plumb level-headed," said Morgan as he closed the hasp and pegged the pin home. "Just keep yore lips buttoned tight about all this till I get yuh to talk. I'll see yuh later. And thanks for yore help."

Leaving the store, Morgan headed for the jailhouse with swift strides. While things were more muddled than ever, he felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his heart. For he was positive now that John Castle had told the truth. He had not killed Ted Brown.

Morgan reconstructed the crime as he felt certain it must have happened. Some time before Castle arrived in town—before McGinnis came to work—an unknown person had gained admittance to the store. Likely Brown had let him in. For an as yet undetermined reason he had shot Brown, doubtless catching him off-guard and killing him with his own gun. Then he had calmly and coolly waited until John Castle came.

What a colossal nerve it must have taken to hide in Brown's sleeping room with the dead man sprawled on the floor of the office, taking the chance of discovery, then to fire three shots at a ceiling corner of the room to correspond with the three bullet-holes in his victim, and toss the murder gun onto the floor beside the dead man!

After McGinnis and Castle had gone to the front of the store, the killer had coolly let himself out the side entrance and gone his way. Anybody in Sundown could have done this and no one would have been any the wiser.

The queer thing about it was that John Castle had heard and seen none of this. This argued that the killer had been expecting Castle and had figured his reaction. Or had he simply waited for the first person who might enter the office? Would he have tried to pin the blame on McGinnis? Had McGinnis himself done it?

Frankly, Morgan did not know. All he knew was that he had to talk to John Castle again and force him to remember hearing those three secondary shots. Surely the old man had not been so stunned that he had failed even subconsciously to take heed of something. Perhaps he had caught a glimpse of the killler without realizing it.

Regardless of all this, it had been as cold and clever a piece of business as Morgan had ever come upon. But there was something far more significant and deeper than sheer nerve and sharp reasoning behind it. There was crafty calculation. If this were true, then John Castle had been the intended victim of this plot from the beginning. It was too coincidental that the old man's chickens had been poisoned and he had come to town in a blind rage against the man he considered responsible, only to find that man dead and himself gathered in as the killer.

Ted Brown had definitely made a couple of moves in the game. His toll-gate scheme indicated that he had been involved in the mystery centering about Calico Pass. Or had he merely been a pawn in the game played by a craftier man?

Wayne Morgan began sifting through the possible suspects. Smiley Cole and Slim Hawkins he dismissed at once. They were deadly enough and cold-blooded enough, but they were not smart enough. They were gunfighters without a qualm of conscience, and with no more subtlety than a rattlesnake. Unless they were operating strictly under the orders of a far more intelligent man.

Morgan began at the top of his list of acquaintances, seeking for this hidden menace. He considered Gregg, the banker; Wheeler, the lawyer; Henderson, the assay man; Reming, the rancher; Chuck Daley, Reming's foreman; Marshal Lewis.

Everybody he had met who might have had the slightest motive. Logically, he discarded all of them as prime suspects except George Reming and Chuck Daley.

"The saltiest pair of the lot," he reflected grimly. "And Reming has the strongest motive. Although I can be a mile wide of the mark. I've simply got to dig something out of Castle."

AS HE neared the jail he became aware of a growing tumult of noise. Milling around in front of the jail was a mob of gesticulating and shouting men, fully three times as many as had been there before lunch. Backed up against the closed door were Marshal Lewis and Sam Wheeler, defiantly facing the mob.

Down the street from the depot came half a dozen men carrying a railroad cross-tie. In the middle of the throng before the jail, egging them on, Morgan caught sight of the lanky Slim Hawkins. At his shoulder, taking no part in the verbal needling but backing up everything his partner said, was the round-faced Smiley Cole.

"Castle's guilty as sin!" Hawkins shouted. "He ought to be lynched and save the expense of a law trial."

"Lynch 'im! Lynch 'im!" yelled a hoarse voice, and gradually the mob picked up the cry, swelling it to a sullen roar.

Morgan turned abruptly, ran between a couple of buildings, and set off at a dead run for the spot where he knew Blue Hawk to be waiting. This was no time for a new deputy named Wayne Morgan to take a hand. This was a full-sized job for the Masked Rider!

Blue Hawk was waiting with Midnight at the designated spot. Morgan wasted little time outlining his plan to the Indian, merely giving the highlights of what had happened, what he had discovered, and what he suspected.

"After we break up this lynch mob idea —if we do" he finished, "you make for the Castle homestead at once, Hawk. Everything centers around that place, and the whole Castle family is in danger. Don't show yoreself, but guard that woman and child with yore life."

"I will not fail, Senor," promised the Indian.

"Good. Let's get moving."

In front of the jail, things were swiftly reaching a climax. Whipped into a senseless fury by the remarks and jabs of Slim Hawkins, the growing mob was howling for John Castle's blood.

The men with the cross-tie panted their way forward and laid the heavy timber down just before the jail door, the crowd parting for them.

"Last chance to do things peaceable, Lewis!" Hawkins snarled, now the acknowledged leader of the lawless group. "Unlock that door and stand aside, or we'll batter it down."

"Are you men crazy?" yelled the marshal. "This is no way for civilized people to act. John Castle hasn't been proved guilty yet. And if he were, the law—"

"The law is the people!" shouted Hawkins. "And we are the people."

The crowd took up the chant:

"We're the people! We're the law!"

"Ted Brown was foully murdered!" yelled a burly citizen who had looked upon too much red-eye this morning. "Justice must be done. Rope justice."

"Stand aside, you two hairpins!" Hawkins ordered Lewis and Wheeler. "Bring up that cross-tie, men."

"You fools!" Sam Wheeler. "John Castle will be duly tried for Brown's killing. Don't pay any attention to this fellow Hawkins. He'll only lead you into trouble."

"Get out of the way" yelled the drunk. "Heave ho, fellers!"

The cross-tie was lifted by willing hands, and the crowd surged forward. Wheeler's face went white in desperation as his gaze flicked over the mob.

"Better pull your gun, Lewis," he said. "There's goin' to be some bloodshed." He reached for his own holster. "I'm shootin' the first man to touch this door!" he shouted.

Smiley Cole now took a hand in the active proceedings. He leaped forward ahead of the men carrying the improvised battering ram and was upon the lawyer before Wheeler could level his weapon. Drawing his gun as he leaped, the glassy-eyed killer raised it and brought it down in a vicious, chopping blow.

The barrel thudded dully against Wheeler's head. The blow knocked the lawyer to his knees where he swayed for an instant then pitched forward on his face, senseless. A trickle of blood sprang into being on his forehead and ran down

his nose, to drip into the dust.

There was a renewed roar from the incited crowd, and the mob surged forward once again. Marshal Lewis was jerked roughly aside. The battering crew lunged, and the ram struck the door with the heavy, echoing thud of doom.

THE barrier quivered violently from the impact and splinters flew. But it stood firm, and the crew swung back to drive the cross-tie once more against the door.

At that instant a fusillade of shots blended with the rataplan of thundering hoofs along the main street behind them. Like magic several black holes appeared on the face of the jail before the howling mob.

From the street and across the open ground came a great black horse at a mad gallop. Seated astride the magnificent animal was a fear-inspiring figure in black sombrero, black mask, and with a black cloak streaming out behind him. In his black-gauntleted hands he gripped a pair of smoking .45s. The huge stallion was bearing down on the mob like a thunderbolt of polished ebony.

For the space of a heartbeat the crowd was paralyzed with fright and indecision. Then a strangled cry arose.

"The Masked Rider!" a man shouted in a frenzy of fear. "That's the Masked Rider!"

The battering crew dropped the cross-tie, and the members of the rioting little mob scattered like wild turkeys, to escape those terrible hoofs and the equally terrible vengeance of the stallion's rider.

All but the two deadly rattlesnakes, Cole and Hawkins, who were hemmed in momentarily in front of the jail door. With a concerted movement they flung themselves with their backs to the door and whipped up their six-shooters to pour hot lead into the man and horse riding down upon them.

They never fired a shot. The door at their backs was suddenly opened wide and the muzzle of a six-shooter was jammed hard against the spine of each.

"Don't crook a finger, gents!" warned the terse voice of Wayne Morgan. "Or I'll blow your backbones through yore middles!"

Marshal Lewis picked himself up from the ground, where he had been thrown, and gaped at the tableau in the doorway. He couldn't understand the appearance of his deputy from inside the jail.

The masked man on the black stallion checked the charge of his mount with his knees. As the great horse came to a slithering halt the rider fastened his glittering eyes on the two frozen desperadoes in front of Morgan. Libby Martin might have noticed that the eyes of the Masked Rider had miraculously changed in color from deep blue to black.

"Drop yore guns!" the rider ordered harshly.

"I reckon I've sort of got things under control now, Masked Rider," drawled Morgan. "But it would have gone mighty bad if you hadn't shown up to take a hand. Marshal Lewis and I shore do thank yuh."

"It is well," grunted the disguised Blue Hawk. "I go now. Next time I come I shoot to kill."

He holstered his guns, wheeled his horse, and galloped off the way he had come. The four men watched his de-

[*Turn page*]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

parture in silence. Then Morgan spoke.

"Unfang these two sidewinders, Marshal," he said. "It's time we took 'em inside for some questionin'."

CHAPTER XI

Morgan Draws a Blank

HAWKINS and Cole remained stonily silent as Marshal Lewis took their guns from unresisting hands.

"What happened to Sam Wheeler?" asked Morgan, looking down at the prone figure of the lawyer.

Lewis nodded at Smiley Cole. "I'm afraid this man killed him," he said sadly. "He hit him over the head with his gun."

"Pick Wheeler up," Morgan ordered his two prisoners. "Bring him into the jail office careful-like."

Without a word the two men did as directed, placing the lawyer's body on a wooden bench. Marshal Lewis followed with the prisoners' guns. He halted in new perplexity at sight of John Castle standing on the threshold of the door leading to the cells.

"How did he get out of his cell?" he demanded.

"I let him out," said Morgan. "I was all set to spirit him away from danger through the back corridor window when the Masked Rider horned in to help us out."

"Where did you come from?" Lewis suddenly remembered the odd appearance of his deputy. "I thought you went to talk to McGinnis."

"I did. I was comin' back when I saw the fracas startin' here at the front. So I ducked around to the back and come in the corridor window. . . Watch these two polecats while I have a look at Wheeler."

A cursory examination showed that Sam Wheeler was still alive. He was unconscious and suffering from a badly torn place in his scalp, but outside of that, and a lump the size of a small egg as well as a probable concussion, he was all right.

"Well, that saves you from a manslaughter charge, Cole," Morgan said. "Whether Sam Wheeler will want to press other charges against yuh we'll see when he comes out of it. Better go get the doctor, Marshal. And while yuh're at it, get the judge, too. I've got some evidence to present for John Castle."

"What do you mean?" asked the surprised Lewis, while Cole and Hawkins stared in wide-eyed curiosity.

"Castle was tellin' us the truth," said Morgan. "He didn't kill Ted Brown, and I can prove it."

John Castle collapsed in a chair and sat there trembling, his hands over his face. Marshal Lewis departed on the run. Morgan settled down behind the office desk and indicated a couple of battered chairs to the two ugly range tramps.

"Just as well sit down, gents," he said, "unless yuh'd rather I'd lock yuh up now."

They sat down quickly. In a few minutes Marshal Lewis returned with Judge Pelton and Dr. Chandler. All of them waited while the doctor went to work on the unconscious lawyer. Doc Chandler patched up the lacerated place first. Then he administered restoratives, and at last Wheeler groaned and came around.

"How do you feel, Sam?" Lewis asked anxiously.

"I've got a splitting headache," admitted the lawyer thickly. "What happened to me? Oh, yes, I remember now. Wait till I lay my hands on that Cole fellow!"

"Yuh could do that now," Morgan said drily, "but yuh ain't in the best shape to try it."

Wheeler spied Smiley Cole smiling at him blankly. His face clouded with righteous wrath and he struggled to get to his feet. Doc Chandler calmly pushed him back.

"Take it easy, Wheeler," advised the physician. "You ought to be in bed for a couple days. Now, gents, any other patients for me?"

There were not. Morgan quickly related the gist of recent events, and turned to the mustached town judge.

"Judge Pelton," he said, "I wanted you to hear the facts I've unearthed about the shootin' of Ted Brown."

He related what he had discovered as a result of his activities.

"I know this isn't conclusive evidence," he added, "but it bears out what John Castle has told us. I suggest that yuh question Castle and see if we can't release him under bond of some sort. He's got a

daughter and grandchild to look after, yuh know."

The frontier judge sighed. "Yes, I know. Yuh've done good work, Morgan, but yuh haven't acquitted Castle. I think we all believe there's probably truth in yore reasonin', but we'll need more'n theory. I'll ask yuh to dig out them ceilin' bullets, Marshal Lewis, and round up the witnesses. I'll hear preliminaries on this case the first thing in the mornin'. And I'll want Pat McGinnis and Ben Bogart in court. Mebbe we might be able to turn John Castle loose on suitable bail."

"I'll take your case, John," said Wheeler quickly. "I'll go your bond myself, too."

"You can't let him go this afternoon on bail?" Morgan asked the judge, disappointed.

THE judge shook his head.

"He wouldn't be safe anyhow—not with hotheads tryin' to lynch him."

"Which brings me to a matter I was drivin' at," went on Morgan. "If Castle didn't shoot Brown—and there's shore reasonable doubt that he did—who else could have done it? In this office right now are two men who tried to scare Castle into sellin' 'em his place cheap. They're trouble-makers—took a big hand in that fracas here a while ago. They're after John Castle's hide. And I want to find out from Cole and Hawkins just where they were early this mornin'."

Both Hawkins and Cole jumped to their feet.

"No yuh don't, Morgan!" sneered Hawkins. "Yuh ain't goin' to hang that Brown business on us. We was out of town. We met John Castle right after daybreak near Calico Pass and rode with him to town. We never went near Brown's store."

This was a surprise twist. All eyes sought Castle's face for a denial. But the old rancher was nodding.

"That's right," he said. "They was camped near the trail, fixin' an early breakfast when I come along. I was so mad about my chickens I plumb forgot they had tried to buy my place before. They rode to town with me real neighborly, and never once said anything about buyin' out my place. They was right sympathetic about my dead chickens."

This flabbergasted Morgan. It completely exonerated the two killers of being implicated in Brown's death. Grim irony that the man they had sought to help hang should testify in their behalf. Morgan had not dreamed of this possibility. It killed all chance of surprising any information out of the wily pair, and Morgan had fired off his thunder for nothing. The element of surprise he had figured on to shake Cole and Hawkins had boomeranged. He had tipped his hand in vain as far as this precious pair was concerned.

"I reckon that's all we can do today, men," said Judge Pelton, getting to his feet. "Better lock Castle back up, Brother Lewis, although I'm shore we can do somethin' for him at the hearin' in the mornin'."

"I'm curious about this Masked Rider buckaroo," said Dr. Chandler. "I've heard all sorts of tales about him. I didn't know he was real, much less in this part of the country."

"He's real enough, all right," the judge said, tugging at his chin. "I'm interested in him myself. Lewis, ain't there a price on his head?"

"I haven't any circulars on him, Judge," the marshal answered. "What do you know about him, Morgan?"

"I don't reckon I've heard as much about that hairpin as the rest of you men," Morgan said, with a straight face. "I was mighty glad he showed up to lend a hand in breakin' up that mob."

"Lend a hand?" challenged Marshal Lewis. "It looked to me like he broke things up single-handed."

"I guess he did at that," Morgan admitted soberly. "What are we goin' to do with these two range tramps? Lock 'em up?"

"I don't see how we can do that unless we lock up everybody who was in that mob," puzzled the marshal. "What do you think, Judge?"

The judge reflected, eyeing the two culprits with a jaundiced eye.

"I'm afraid yuh'll have to round up all the rest if yuh do that," he said. "And the jail ain't big enough for that many. I'm afraid we'll have to let 'em go."

"But they were the ones behind that lynch mob!" protested Morgan.

"Hard to prove," said Pelton. "And they didn't commit any crime. Men do reckless things when they're excited, but you and the Masked Rider stopped 'em in time."

Morgan turned toward the lawyer. "How about you, Wheeler? Don't yuh want to press charges of assault and battery?"

The lawyer groaned and felt gingerly of his head. "It was all part of a mob action, Morgan," he said wearily. "I guess I'm lucky I wasn't killed. I don't believe I'd keep 'em in the same jail with John Castle. Run 'em out of town again, and if they come back, I'll help you kill 'em. Doc, I'm getting sick and dizzy."

"You're going right to bed," said Chandler promptly. "Judge, lend me a hand to help Sam over to his place."

The two men half-carried the injured lawyer out. In bitter silence Morgan watched them depart. While Lewis ushered the old chicken rancher back to his cell, Morgan slowly unloaded the guns belonging to Hawkins and Cole. He shoved the weapons across the desk to them. Both men were slyly laughing at him.

"You win this time, gents," he said laconically. "But I've got yuh tabbed. Don't crowd yore luck too far."

"This makes the second time yuh got us in the back, Morgan," said Hawkins as he holstered his empty guns. "I promise yuh it's the last. Come on, Smiley, let's hit for free range."

COLE coolly rolled a cigarette before putting his guns away. He lighted it and flipped the match insolently across the desk in Morgan's general direction. Slowly he pouched his guns, smiling at the disgruntled deputy marshal. He seemed in a most jovial mood, but his marblelike eyes were as glassy as agate as he met the gaze of Wayne Morgan.

After they had walked out, Morgan leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

"Sometimes," he reflected, "I'm not near as smart as I think I am."

Marshal Lewis returned to the front office. He studied his unusual deputy shrewdly.

"I didn't quite follow what you were driving at, Morgan," he said, "but whatever it was, it didn't pan out so well, did it?"

"No, it didn't," Morgan conceded frankly.

"But you've convinced me John Castle didn't kill Ted Brown. I could hardly believe it, anyway. So Cole and Hawkins had nothing to do with the job, either."

"They didn't do the trigger work," Morgan admitted. "But they came to town with Castle to help hang the job onto him—and then tried to hang him!"

Marshal Lewis looked startled. His jaw dropped.

"What? Do you think—"

"I think that John Castle rode so neighborly into town with the very shorthorns who poisoned his chickens. But I can't prove it."

CHAPTER XII

Puzzled Lawyer

FAR MORE than once in his strenuous career Wayne Morgan had wished that he were indeed the two separate persons the Masked Rider and Wayne Morgan were supposed to be. Now he wished it more than ever.

He wanted to return to the Castle homestead immediately. He was positive that the chicken rancher's family needed the protection of the Masked Rider far more desperately than surface indications showed. But Wayne Morgan had to remain in Sundown to watch over John Castle and to see that the evidence, meager though it was, was properly presented at the preliminary hearing in the morning. He had to rely on the faithful Blue Hawk to guard the woman and child on the chicken ranch.

It was late afternoon before Morgan found the time to pursue certain investigations which had been interrupted by the stirring events of the day. The sun was sinking redly in the west when he turned his steps toward the Government land and assay office. He found Bert Henderson on the verge of closing up, but willing to discuss the recent excitement.

"Looks like the Reverend Lewis hired a gun deputy in the nick of time, Morgan," Henderson commented. "Criminal business is pickin' up right smart hereabouts."

"Business of some sort is, anyway," agreed Morgan. "Look, Henderson, I'd like to ask yuh a few confidential questions."

The stout assay man promptly leaned his red-flannel-clad elbows on the counter and surveyed the deputy marshal solemnly.

"Shore, Morgan. Anything I can tell yuh. But I don't reckon I know anything about the Brown killin'. That was a slick piece of work yuh did—findin' them extra bullet holes in the ceilin'. Everybody's talkin' about it."

"That's what I'm afraid of," was Morgan's rueful retort. "I sort of shot my wad too quick. I should have held my fire until I had more proof."

"Shucks! Yuh're doin' all right. Me and Pat Gordon was figgerin' it out while ago. I was down to see Ted Brown in his office yestiddy afternoon about a little bill I owe him, and I'm willin' to swear there was no fresh bullet-holes in his ceilin' then."

"Did yuh look?" asked Morgan. "How did yuh happen to notice?"

"Brown was talkin' about paintin' his office over, and we looked the whole room over, figgerin' how much paint it would take. I'm willin' to swear there wasn't a bullet mark anywhere. Won't that cinch things for you and Castle?"

"I'm afraid not. It will prove that somebody recently fired three mysterious shots into the ceilin', but it don't prove that Castle didn't fire the three shots into Brown's back."

Henderson looked crestfallen.

"But it does help a heap," Morgan hastened to add. "It proves my theory. I want yuh to tell Judge Pelton this in the mornin'. Right now, there's somethin' else I want to ask yuh. Yuh run an assay office here as well as a Government land office. There ain't much business for that assay sort of thing, is there?"

"Not much," Henderson admitted. "But now and then a feller comes in with ore samples."

"Think back," said Morgan. "Mebbe two years. I want to know if anybody came in with rock samples for analysis in that time."

"Shore," said Henderson. "Mebbe a dozen prospectors in that time. Yuh can't tell me any closer'n that? Or what kind of samples?"

"I think copper."

"Copper?" This touched a spark in Henderson's memory. "Shore! I run a test on copper about nine-ten months ago. Found a heavy assay, too. Funny thing about that. The feller wouldn't file a claim. When I give him the report he asked to see my record books. He looked up a few homestead filin's while I was busy. Then he cussed some and refused to give me the location of his claim. Just paid me for the assay and told me to forget it."

"Who was it?" Morgan demanded. "Did yuh know the man?"

"Of course I knowed him," snorted Henderson. "It was Chuck Daley, a cowboy prospector. He went to ridin' soon after that for George Reming."

Chuck Daley! This was a bull's-eye. Without showing his elation, Morgan pursued his inquiry.

"I don't think that's what I'm lookin' for," he said. "But have yuh got a copy of the assay report?"

"Nope. When he decided not to file his location claim Daley took his samples and report and lit out."

"Let me see yore record book on homestead recordin's," Morgan requested.

OBLIGINGLY Henderson got out his books. Morgan looked up the filing on the Castle homestead. When he found it several things became clear to him. John Castle had made a thorough job of homesteading. Not only had he filed on the land at Calico Pass, but he had filed on the mineral and water rights, also. The Castle acreage was more than a stopper in a bottle. It was a metal rivet which hopelessly spiked the plans of anybody who may have found valuable ore underlying the property.

Quietly closing the record book, Morgan thanked the assay man and went out. Henderson, rolling down his shirt sleeves, stared after him blankly.

"Now what," the assay man asked himself in perplexity, "did I tell that jasper that has any bearin' on the shootin' of Ted Brown?"

Morgan made his way to the Eagle Cafe for supper. As he ate he listened to the conversation of the proprietor with one ear while he marshaled his facts in logical array.

First, Chuck Daley had discovered copper ore in Calico Pass. Unable to file on the mineral claim, he had gone to work for George Reming. George Reming, now

that Castle had proved up on his homestead, had taken an option on the land just north of the Castle place. And somebody had hired Cole and Hawkins to run the old chicken rancher off his little ranch.

True, Ted Brown had put his finger into the pie by trying to go into the toll-gate business with Castle. And he had been slain for his trouble. That was another finger which pointed at the owner of the Rocking R brand.

"Marshal Lewis was just in, gettin' some supper for Castle," Gordon informed. "He asked if I'd seen you. He's expectin' yuh to stand watch at the jail tonight."

"I aim to," said Morgan. "Have yuh heard how Sam Wheeler's doin'? Pretty bad blow he got on the noggin'."

"Yeah. I'm fixin' a tray of food and a pot of coffee to send up to him."

"Get it ready now," said Morgan, "and I'll take it up for yuh."

He found the lawyer's office closed and dark. Getting no response to his knock, he tried the door. It opened, and he entered.

"Hello?" he called softly. "Yuh here, Wheeler?"

The door to the lawyer's living quarters in the back was open, and there was a stirring in response to his call.

"Who is it?" came Wheeler's voice.

"Morgan. I've brought yuh some food from the cafe."

"Oh, thanks, Morgan. Come on in. I think I was asleep."

Morgan entered the back room where he found the lawyer lying in bed, his head bandaged, his eyes feverish. Morgan lighted the lamp and set out the supper.

"Thanks, Morgan," the lawyer said again. "I was thinking about you. I'm glad you came up. I want to talk to you."

"I sort of had the same idea about you," Morgan grinned. "Take yore time. How yuh feelin' by now?"

"Pretty rocky," said Wheeler, sipping his coffee. "Chandler left me some headache powders. I'll be all right when they take effect. I'm not hungry. What I wanted to talk about was those two range tramps. I couldn't think clearly this afternoon."

"It's a little late if yuh're thinkin' of havin' them arrested now," said Morgan in a dry voice.

"I'm not." Wheeler frowned, in thought. "I want to talk over the whole queer case with you. Maybe I can make it plain why I wasn't anxious to press any charges against Cole before I know certain things."

"Go ahead," invited Morgan. Stretching his long legs out in front of him, he relaxed.

Wheeler put his coffee cup on the table and carefully leaned back against the head of the bed. He weighed his words, choosing them with deliberation.

"I don't believe John Castle killed Ted Brown," he said. "I would have taken his case whether you had dug up any evidence for him or not. In fact, I went to see Brown right after Castle was in town the other day. I warned Brown against trying that toll-gate business with Castle. I represent the cattle ranchers, too, you know. I even tried to buy Castle's note from Brown, but he almost threw me out. Anyway, I told the cattlemen what was in the wind. Perhaps I made a mistake, but I figured it was my duty, since I work for them. George Reming was the maddest man I ever saw. I—"

"Are yuh gettin' ready to accuse Reming of killin' Brown?" Morgan interrupted.

WHEELER eyed him in blank surprise.

"I certainly am not," he replied. "George Reming isn't that kind of man. But he'd be a fool not to take some measures to protect his own interests. This is what I think. I'm afraid George hired those two gunslingers, Cole and Hawkins, to try to buy Castle out—and they've gone too far. Before I take any action against Cole I want to talk to Reming and find out how deeply he's implicated. Somebody has lit a fire I may not be able to put out. Wait, I'll show you."

He started to get up, but fell back with a groan of pain and clutched his head. Morgan sprang up to help him, and Wheeler waved him back.

"Never mind. I'm all right. But my head's splitting. Go into my office and pull open the bottom right-hand drawer of my desk. You'll find an alphabetic file of folders there. Bring me the one marked with Reming's name."

Morgan found the file and started riffling through it quickly. In the D section he glimpsed the name of Daley, and paused

long enough to note a number of papers in the folder. Then he riffled onward to the R section and found the Reming folder.

"Can't you find it?" Wheeler called impatiently.

"Yeah, I got it," Morgan replied. "I thought I saw a file marked with Chuck Daley's name."

"Likely you did," said Wheeler. "He's Reming's foreman."

"What kind of law business would he have?" Morgan asked in blunt curiosity.

"None," Wheeler admitted, with a slight smile. "I keep cases on everybody I know anything about. Especially everybody mixed up in this new cattle association we're forming. . . Here, these are the papers I want to show you. I must ask you to keep all this confidential, Morgan. I can't violate the confidence of any of my clients, but I must show you what a delicate situation this whole business is and how carefully I must move."

Morgan glanced over the various items shown him concerning the cattle association and Reming's maneuvers to avoid the danger of a land-blocked pass.

"All of this actually proves nothing," Wheeler went on, "but it shows you that Reming is vitally interested in Calico Pass. This latest paper is a copy of the option he just took on the land north of Castle's place."

"Why?" Morgan demanded.

Wheeler shrugged. "Perhaps as a counter-threat to dam off the creek water if Castle should ever put in that toll-gate."

"Or mebbe to impound water for minin' operations if he can get hold of the Castle land," Morgan added to himself.

"What I'm trying to show you," said the lawyer earnestly, "is that while I will do everything in my power to clear John Castle of this killing he's accused of, I simply can't take any rash steps with fellows like Cole and Hawkins until I find out from George Reming what, if any, dealings he's had with these gunslingers."

"And if Reming hasn't had any dealin's?"

"In that case, I'll back your play to the limit," Wheeler promised in a grim voice. "Meanwhile, we've got to get John Castle out of his predicament, and I am confident —thanks to you—that we can do it. You don't know how grateful I am, Morgan, but the fact is—well, you see, I'm deeply interested in Libby Martin myself. Castle's daughter."

"So I've heard. I've also heard that Reming's interested there, too."

"I know that," Wheeler admitted frankly. "But that has nothing to do with this other business. I am Reming's lawyer and I'm duty bound to protect his interests. . . Oh, don't bother with this folder. I want to study some of the papers. Would you pour me another cup of coffee?"

Morgan poured the coffee and said good night. Thoughtfully he made his way to the adobe jail where the Reverend Lewis was fretfully awaiting him.

CHAPTER XIII

The Noose Tightens

DURING this same period of time the man who was uppermost in Morgan's thoughts was indulging in a paroxysm of rage for the benefit of Slim Hawkins and Smiley Cole at their campfire on the creek bank.

"Of all the chuckle-headed, locoed idiots I ever saw," Daley stated as he strode back and forth, "you two trail bums ride point. What if that lynchin' had been successful? Instead of gettin' Castle into such a fix that he'd have to sell his place, yuh'd have had him dead."

"Wouldn't that of been just as good?" demanded Hawkins sourly. "Yuh told us yuh wanted Castle run off, didn't yuh? Well, yuh'd shore been rid of him."

"That was the idea of gettin' him in a bad fix—so he'll have to sell out to raise money to defend hisself," Daley said angrily.

"I don't see no difference," opined Hawkins.

Chuck Daley glared at the thin bandit across the fire.

"A dead man can't sign quitclaim deeds," he explained in icy disgust. "If yuh'd lynched Castle the whole thing would have been tied up for years—mebbe till the kid came of age. Anyway till a new scheme could be figgered out to handle the woman. The boss is goin' to be mad as hops when he hears about this. Why in tarnation—"

"Better go easy, Daley," warned Hawk-

ins, glancing at the silent Cole who was staring at the Rocking R foreman with eyes that were slowly turning glassy. "Yuh didn't explain all this to us careful enough. No need to talk ugly now. We've been rode too much today already by that deputy marshal. And there ain't no sense gettin' yore dander up over somethin' that didn't happen. That Masked Rider jigger wasn't on the program either. Yuh ain't showed any worry over him turnin' up. Don't that bother yuh none?"

Chuck Daley halted in his angry striding and threw a queer glance from one to the other of his hirelings.

"That," he said, "is no news to me. I already knew that nosy outlaw had bought chips in the game. Has he got you two buckaroos buffaloed? Are yuh afraid of another outlaw because he wears a mask?"

Hawkins snorted in disdain. Smiley Cole made no sound, but his lips parted in a faint, amused smile.

"It's lucky for you men the Masked Rider did show up," Daley went on viciously. "If yuh'd got Castle lynched yuh wouldn't have outlived him another day. The boss would have killed yuh."

"The trouble with you, Daley," Cole said in a mild voice, "is that yuh're afraid of the wrong man."

"Meanin' what?" demanded Daley, his irate gaze on Cole's round, smiling face.

"What's Reming got on yuh?" asked Cole softly. "I can name three men more dangerous to yuh than he is."

"Name 'em," said Daley.

"This Masked rider, Slim Hawkins—and me," obliged Cole. He had not moved. And he continued to smile.

"Smiley, take it easy!" rapped Hawkins in a thin voice. "Stop rilin' us, Daley," he went on to the Rocking R foreman. "So we made a mistake in town, but no harm's been done. Instead, we found out for yuh that that snoopin' deputy has dug up some queer facts which is liable to turn Castle loose. We done the job on the chickens just like yuh ordered, but it looks like somebody else has slipped up on the Brown killin'. Yuh're lucky we found that out."

This struck home. Chuck Daley fought to control himself. He swallowed his anger. When he spoke again it was in a much quieter voice—and all the more deadly.

"There'll be no more slip-ups. Our next move will sew John Castle up in a sack."

At nine o'clock the next morning John Castle appeared in Judge Pelton's court for his preliminary hearing on the murder of Theodore Brown. At ten o'clock he was released on his own recognizance, a free man pending further investigation.

The courtroom was crowded with interested citizens. Even Peter Gregg had condescended to leave his bank. Sam Wheeler, still pale and shaky, and with his head bandaged, was on hand as the accused man's counsel. Marshal Lewis and Deputy Morgan represented the law.

In short order the evidence and the various witnesses were presented to the court. Wheeler neatly followed out Morgan's line of reasoning concerning the possibility of another person having committed the crime. Then the testimony of Bart Henderson—a surprise witness called by Morgan—established the fact that there had been no bullet-holes in the ceiling the evening before the killing. This proved sufficient to conclude that a person or persons unknown had been in Brown's quarters prior to Castle's visit.

UNDER Morgan's adroit questioning Castle stated that he might have heard the three pistol shots and taken no heed of them in his stunned condition.

Morgan applied the clincher.

"If it pleases the court," he said, "I would like to ask Bart Henderson a couple of more questions."

Judge Pelton called the assay man back to the stand. Even Sam Wheeler looked up in perplexity from his seat at the defense table. Everything this new deputy marshal did carried an element of surprise.

"Proceed, Mr. Morgan," ordered the judge.

"My purpose is not to accuse anybody of anything at this time," stated Morgan, slowly advancing to confront the puzzled witness, "but I want to submit certain evidence which may be valuable in further investigation. I mean to show there mebbe was a motive for the shootin' of Ted Brown other than to keep a cattle tollgate away from Calico Pass, and more reason than a quarrel between Castle and Brown. Mr. Henderson, will yuh please repeat what yuh told me yesterday about

that assay yuh ran some ten months ago?"

"Yuh mean—Chuck Daley?" asked the Government man.

"I do," said Morgan, and there was a great stir in the room as everybody leaned forward in sharpened interest.

Henderson related the circumstance in some detail. When he had finished, before anyone else could interject comment, Morgan took it up.

"I examined John Castle's homestead filin' yesterday, Mr. Henderson. Will yuh tell the court whether I'm right in statin' that Castle filed on the mineral rights to his land, also?"

"That's right," said the Government man.

Morgan turned to address the intent judge. The entire room was silent in order to hear what he said.

"Judge Pelton, there is evidence in a cleft in the south side of Calico Pass—on John Castle's property—that samples of rock were taken out for assay. If yuh'll order that more samples be brought in from this same spot for analysis it'll be found that Calico Pass is rich in copper deposits. I charge that Chuck Daley found copper on the Castle homestead, then learned he couldn't file on the mineral rights. He kept it all to himself, refusin' to tell about the location of his find.

"I'm not chargin' Chuck Daley with any crime, nor with any scheme to drive John Castle off his place, but I do believe that this information has somethin' to do with the mystery around the killin' of Ted Brown, the poisonin' of John Castle's chickens, and the attempt of Slim Hawkins and Smiley Cole to force a sale of the Castle property at a ridiculous price."

An uproar in the courtroom was the result of this amazing denouement. The judge had to rap strenuously for order. Sam Wheeler got to his feet and turned reproachful eyes on Wayne Morgan.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" he asked.

"It isn't proof of anything," Morgan answered truthfully. "I'm goin' off at half-cock again, but I'm doin' it to save Castle's neck."

"You've saved it," said Wheeler. "Listen to the judge."

"Silence! Order!" roared Pelton. "Yuh're dang right it's got somethin' to do with it, Morgan. I'm releasin' John Castle till more evidence is gathered. I order you, Bart Henderson, to go to Calico Pass with Deputy Morgan and bring in samples of rock for analysis. Marshal Lewis, I'm issuin' a warrant for the arrest of George Reming and Chuck Daley. Yuh're to bring 'em before this court for investigation."

This was a trifle more than Morgan had bargained for. He had been loath to reveal the evidence he had gathered against Chuck Daley, and he had not intended including the owner of the Rocking R brand in this investigation. Nevertheless, it was a logical move on the part of the court.

"It's sufficient to warrant a sweeping investigation," Wheeler commented. "I can't hold back on George Reming's account in the face of it. I wonder where the devil Reming is, anyway. I haven't seen him for three days."

"Better make up a posse right away, Lewis," Judge Pelton said to the town marshal, "and ride down to Reming's."

"You won't need a posse to bring George in," said Wheeler. "I know he'll

[*Turn page*]

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come peacefully on a pocket warrant."

"I reckon so," agreed the marshal. "Morgan and I can handle the two of them."

"Yuh won't need my help, Marshal," said Morgan, yawning widely. "I got to get some rest. I was at the jail last night. I'm goin' down to the boardin' house and turn in for a spell. Take Henderson with you."

"Shore, I'll go," said the assay man before Marshal Lewis could protest.

PETER GREGG, smelling a profitable investment and already laying plans to take advantage of it, got busy buttering up John Castle.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you, Brother Castle, on your release. I don't hold with violence, which is never a smart means to any end."

"Thank you," said Castle, allowing the banker to shake his limp hand.

"You sly dog," went on Gregg, in admiration. "Why didn't you tell me you had copper on your land? The bank would have been glad to lend you money. I'd have taken your personal note myself for any reasonable amount."

"I didn't know it," admitted the bewildered chicken rancher honestly. "I still can't believe it. I don't think Morgan knows what he's talkin' about."

Peter Gregg laughed unbelievingly. "Come, come, Mr. Castle, don't pretend any further. You can't make us believe you didn't know this—not after you were shrewd enough to file on your mineral rights."

"But I just happened to do that," protested Castle. "I don't know why, unless it was because of some coal mine rights I saw contested back in Ohio on a neighbor's land. It wasn't the loss of the coal, but it put him right off an alfalfa field he needed."

"You're a smart business man," said Gregg. "I want to talk to you."

"I've got to get on back home now," Castle demurred. "Libby and Susan will be worried to death about me."

"I'll drive out with you," put in the banker smoothly. "You'll likely need some ready cash to tide you over the next few weeks. I'll lend you what you need on your personal note."

Sam Wheeler thrust himself between them to have the released chicken rancher sign his own bond. He eyed the oily banker coldly.

"I'm advancing all the cash my client needs, Peter Gregg," he said in a curt tone. "He's not signing any more notes of any kind without my advice."

"To be sure, to be sure," agreed the banker, unrebuffed, but eyeing the lawyer narrowly. "Well, come on, Mr. Castle, we'll drive out to your place together where we can talk without interruption."

The old man suffered himself to be led away, casting an appealing glance at his lawyer.

"Castle," said Wheeler in a warning voice, "I'm still too weak to go with you now, but don't you sign or promise anything until you talk with me first."

Castle nodded dutifully, and the look the banker gave Wheeler was venomous.

In the general confusion, Morgan managed to elude Marshal Lewis and leave the building to head for Mrs. Gimble's boarding house. But he didn't go to bed. He mounted the gray gelding and quietly slipped out of town, heading for the hideout where Blue Hawk would have left Midnight. He considered it high time the Masked Rider paid an overdue visit to the Rocking R Ranch.

CHAPTER XIV

Sewed up in a Sack

GREGG'S saddle mare was tied to the tailgate of the chicken rancher's buckboard which was rattling into the mouth of Calico Pass when Marshal Lewis and his one-man posse overtook it. The four men proceeded through the pass in a body, looking curiously at the south wall in search of the spot Morgan said had been prospected for copper ore. Castle declined to stop now for a more thorough search.

Lewis and Henderson watched the old man turn his buckboard in at his place and were about to ride on when the marshal held up his hand to wait. For Castle's front gate was splintered, hanging forlornly by one hinge. The front door gaped wide open, and the house had a desolate, desecrated sort of air.

"Come on, Bart," said the marshal uneasily. "We'll stop in for a minute."

They followed the wagon up to the porch, dismounting and crowding into the house behind the frantic old chicken rancher and the banker.

Inside the doorway lay a discharged shotgun. A blasted and shot-riddled spot high up on one wall showed where the two barrels had been fired. An overturned chair and a torn gingham apron indicated that there had been a struggle.

"Libby! Libby! Susan!" shouted Castle, his voice cracking anxiously as he searched through the house.

"Perhaps they're out back," suggested Gregg hopefully. "They must be all right."

"Something's happened!" groaned the distracted old man. "Trouble never comes singly. If only I hadn't gone to town yestiddy!"

Halting helplessly in the kitchen, he stared wildly around the room, Gregg close behind him. Marshal Lewis and the red-faced Henderson tramped in just as the banker pointed at the table.

"Look!" exclaimed Gregg. "There's a message!"

Pinned to the top of the kitchen table with a stag-handled knife was the torn half of a sheet of paper. The old man staggered forward and stared down at the note without trying to free it of its grim spindle. Then he raised wild eyes that gazed unseeingly at the men around him. He uttered a hoarse cry and collapsed on the floor.

"What's the message say?" Lewis demanded, as he knelt beside the stricken Castle and sought to revive the old man.

With a trembling hand the banker wrested the knife from the tabletop. He picked up the torn paper gingerly and stared at the scrawled message. It read:

Yore gal an the kid air alright but if you want thim bak safe be reddy to sign a quitclaim deed to yore ranch fer five hunderd dollers to the man what brings you the other haf of this sheet paper. Dont try to start any trouble in town if you want to see yore wimmenfolks agin. You got jest one day to make up yore mind.

You know who.

"Hand me a dipper of water, Bart," ordered Marshal Lewis. "Well, what does the paper say, Mr. Gregg?"

Clearing his throat, the banker read the message aloud. John Castle choked on a mouthful of water and opened his eyes before Gregg finished.

"I'll do it, I'll do it!" he muttered pitifully. "Get hold of George Reming and tell him I'll sell out peaceful. I can't let anything happen to my little girls."

A spur jangled at the living-room threshold, and a man spoke.

"Who's callin' for me?"

They looked up and around hastily to see George Reming standing in the doorway surveying the group with a puzzled frown on his face. Behind him, peering over his shoulder, was Rod Carter, owner of the Raftered C spread at the south end of the valley.

Instantly Henderson drew his gun and covered the astonished ranchmen.

"Walk in slow," he ordered. "Raise yore hands easy-like. Yuh'll hang for this day's work, Reming."

"No, no!" protested John Castle, climbing to his feet with the aid of Marshal Lewis. "Yuh mustn't harm him. I didn't bring these men here to fight yuh, Reming," he went on pleadingly to the owner of the Rocking R. "They just happened to come by from town with me. I didn't even know about yore warnin' note. I wasn't goin' to put in a toll-gate against yuh. I don't know why yuh didn't trust me. I told Brown I wouldn't do it. Yuh got to believe me, Reming! I'll sell out just like yore note demands. I'll deal peaceful."

"WHAT note?" interrupted Reming. "What's goin' on here?"

Marshal Lewis took the torn sheet from the banker's hand and thrust it at the rancher in silence. Reming frowned, slowly making out the gist of it.

"That ain't my note," he said. "It ain't even my writtin'."

"Of course he would deny it," Peter Gregg said drily. "And nobody said it was his handwriting. Likely Cole or Hawkins wrote it at his order."

"But I don't know what this means," protested Reming. "I just rode up with Carter from—"

"Shut up!" growled Henderson. "We was on our way to arrest yuh, anyhow. Yuh just saved us some ridin'."

"No, no!" pleaded John Castle. "For pity's sake, wait!"

There was the heavy thud of a footfall at the back door.

"Yes, gents," said a harsh, deep voice, "let's wait long enough to hear Reming's side of the story."

Heads jerked around as though on a common string. The breath whistled audibly through Marshal Lewis' nostrils. For there filling the doorway was the somber form of the Masked Rider.

"Go on, Reming," ordered the Masked Rider. "You and Carter rode up from where?"

"From Carter's place," Reming said slowly, staring at the masked and cloaked figure curiously. "We'd just got back from Rio Puerco where we went to see about shippin' market cattle out of there. I wasn't expectin' any trouble with John Castle at Calico Pass, but a man's a fool who don't look ahead and plan for emergencies."

"Rio Puerco?" queried the Masked Rider. "That's the river town about thirty miles east of here?"

"That's right."

"Is this true, Carter?" the Masked Rider demanded of Reming's companion who had been silently trying to grasp the meaning of this peculiar mess.

"'Course it's true," snapped the owner of the Raftered C. "Reming and me rode over to Rio Puerco day before yestiddy and only got back this mornin'. We heard about the Brown shootin' at my place and rode up to see if we could help John Castle any."

This substantiation took the wind out of more than one set of sails. It was obvious that if Reming had gone to a town more than thirty miles distant two days previous and had just returned this morning he could have had no personal hand in the events which threatened to engulf the chicken rancher. He was guilty neither of poisoning chickens, shooting Ted Brown, nor abducting Libby Martin and her child.

The Masked Rider, who judged men by their actions and characters as well as by their stories, was convinced that the Rocking R owner was innocent. Somehow, he was glad.

"I believe yuh're in the clear, Reming," he said, in his deep voice. "I don't think yuh've got the other half of this piece of paper on yuh, but would yuh mind bein' searched, to convince Mrashal Lewis?"

"Of course not," agreed the ranchman readily. Stepping forward, he spread his arms wide.

Bart Henderson promptly went through Reming's pockets, even looking inside his hat and his boots. He unearthed nothing more unusual than a Rio Puerco freight billing form with some penciled figures on it.

"Search me, too," volunteered Carter. "Let's clean up the whole corral while we're at it."

Nothing was found on the Raftered C cattleman.

"I guess this gives you a clean ticket, Reming," said Marshal Lewis. "I'll still have to take you in later on a court order for questioning. I don't suppose you've heard the developments of this morning. Your foreman, Chuck Daley, is mixed up in this business over his ears."

"Chuck Daley?" repeated Reming. "I —I can't believe that."

"Tell him, Bart," ordered Lewis, and Henderson related the gist of his copper ore story.

"Better set yore mind to it," the Masked Rider advised the stunned ranchman. "I believe yuh're innocent, but yuh can bet yore last cow that Daley is crooked. I know he's behind the kidnapin' of Libby Martin and Susan."

THIS brought the immediate emergency uppermost in everybody's mind. John Castle groaned and tottered over to drop heavily onto a chair.

"I'm still whipped," he mumbled dispiritedly. "I've got to do what that note says to save my children."

George Reming at last caught fire. His face darkened. His rage was terrible to see.

"If Chuck Daley has laid his hand on Libby and Susan, I'll kill him with my bare hands! Consider me under arrest if yuh like, Lewis, but I'm goin' after Daley with yuh. Let's ride!"

"Ride where?" inquired Gregg's acid voice. "You still don't know where to hunt, and you've only got twenty-four hours to do it in."

For a moment there was a stunned silence as the significance of this remark sank in. Then Reming clenched his fists. The muscles of his neck corded.

"I'll get Daley," he vowed in a husky voice, "if I have to foller him from Canada

to Mexico!"

"But not in time to save Libby and Susan," said John Castle feebly. "Can't you men understand I've got to do what I'm told? I don't want revenge. I don't care about keepin' this place. What good is anything to me if—if I lose my kids? I've got no time to delay while yuh scour the country lookin' for the man that done this to me."

"Yuh have until the man with the other half of this paper shows up," pointed out the Masked Rider. "I reckon it will be either Cole or Hawkins. Though it might be Daley himself."

"If we only had an idea where to hunt!" ruminated Marshal Lewis, pulling worriedly at his lip. "We could— How do you know Daley is behind this kidnaping, Masked Rider?"

"I had an ace in the hole," the Masked Rider admitted.

He stepped back outside the door and raised his voice in a low but chilling imitation of a mountain lion's call. He was answered immediately from a spot not far away. In a moment a stalwart Indian padded into the house on moccasined feet.

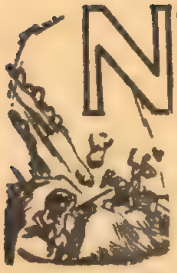
"The Indian from town!" exclaimed Gregg.

"Blue Hawk!" cried Marshal Lewis.

"Blue Hawk," agreed the Masked Rider. "Hawk, tell these men what yuh told me when I rode up."

CHAPTER XV

The Drygulcher



NODDING the Indian obeyed the Masked Rider's request.

"*Si*, Senor," he said. "I was up on mountain this morning overlooking this place when I saw three men ride down through pass and come to house. One sneak around to back while other two make noise at front, tear down gate. Woman come to door with shotgun and warn intruders away. Big argument. I too far away to hear words but come closer to see what happen. Then man who go to back slip up behind woman and grab her. Shotgun go off.

"All go in house. Pretty quick they come out with woman and little girl. Mount ponies and ride away. Too many for Blue Hawk to attack. I trail them to little cabin over on east mountain range. Then I come back and tell Masked Rider when he come along."

"Did yuh recognize the men, Hawk?" prompted the Masked Rider.

"*Si*, Senor," answered the Indian calmly. "Hawkins and Cole, the two men who jump Mr. Castle one day in Sundown—and man called Chuck Daley who came along that day in town later with Mr. Reming."

"This morning?" puzzled Marshal Lewis. "And they left this note for John Castle here. They must have known Castle was going to be released."

"Of course they did," said the Masked Rider with more emphasis than seemed called for. "Thanks to yore chuckleheaded deputy, Marshal, they knew Castle was escapin' the killer trap."

"I think Morgan's a good man," said Lewis defensively.

"He probably means well," grunted the Masked Rider, "but he talks ahead of himself."

"Can yuh take me to that mountain cabin, Blue Hawk?" Reming growled.

"If the Senor say so," agreed the Indian. "Not far. Maybe two hours."

"I say so, Hawk," said the Masked Rider. "We must rescue the woman and child. But we must leave somebody on guard here just in case one of the men comes back to get hold of John Castle."

"I'll stay with Castle," volunteered Peter Gregg hastily. "I don't hold with violence."

"I do," said Rod Carter in a flat voice. "I'll stay, too, and Gawd help the coyote who shows up with the other half of this paper!"

"Good man," the Masked Rider approved. "But take him alive."

"I must go along!" cried the old chicken rancher feverishly.

"Yuh'll stay here," contradicted the Masked Rider firmly. "Yuh've got to be here to trap our man if he's left that cabin. Well, Marshal Lewis? You and Henderson comin' along with Reming and me?"

"I may be a man of the cloth, Masked Rider," said Lewis with dignity, "but I know my duty. Lead on, Blue Hawk."

Two hours later the five men, now on foot, halted in some brush on a mountain

slope below a growth of scrawny trees which masked a one-room log cabin.

"The dirty skunk!" raged Reming. "That's one of my own line shacks."

The Masked Rider was scanning the terrain carefully.

"There's not much cover," he said. "We must spread out, and we can sneak a little closer. Then we must either lay low and nab 'em as they come out, or take a chance and rush 'em. Either way there must be no wild firin'. We must be careful of the woman and child. Too bad we haven't got any rifles with us ecxept Hawk's and mine."

Reming shot a glance up at the copse of small trees. Then he loosened his six-shooter.

"Figger it out any way yuh please, Masked Rider," he said grimly, "but I'm walkin' up there to have it out with Daley! I know this place. There's only one door to it. There's three small windows, on the back and sides. You men can cover 'em and pick the skunks off if they try to run when I flush 'em out."

"Don't be a fool, man!" said the Masked Rider. "Those men are deadly. They'll kill yuh. Think of Libby Martin—and Susan."

"I am thinkin' of 'em. They won't hurt 'em. The devils are after John Castle's land. And I say that they ain't goin' to get it."

"Wait!" ordered the Masked Rider sternly.

For answer Reming turned and started up the hill slope.

"I'm goin' in to throttle Chuck Daley with my bare hands," he grated. "He's grown too big for his pants."

"Stop!" called Henderson, and cocked his gun.

"Shoot me in the back and the devil with yuh!" said Reming, without pausing or looking around.

"Hawk," said the Masked Rider in a sharp tone, "give Henderson yore rifle and go cover the back window. Yuh can get closer to the house without bein' seen. Marshal, take my long gun. You two men scatter and creep up on the sides."

"What are you going to do?" asked Lewis, accepting the rifle.

"Go in with that crazy fool yonder," replied the Masked Rider, starting up the slope after George Reming.

INSIDE the cabin a disheveled Libby Martin crouched in a plain, rickety chair and clasped her wide-eyed daughter close. Slim Hawkins was squatting before the stone fireplace, coaxing a blaze into being out of shavings and small brush. Smiley Cole sat on one of the two disreputable bunks and kept his unwinking blue eyes on the captives. Chuck Daley stood by the battered table, checking over a small supply of provisions they had brought along.

"It's gettin' along in the afternoon," he said. "I got to be leavin' to report to the boss. Yuh've got enough grub here to last five days if yuh have to stay holed up that long."

Hawkins twisted his head around. "Yuh said it would only take till tomorrow. We ain't got enough feed for the hosses to last five days."

"Stake 'em out to graze. I'll see to it that none of the Rockin' R outfit ride this part of the range while yuh're here."

"Yuh said tomorrow," repeated Hawkins flatly. "Smiley and me ain't playin' jailers for a helpless female."

"She's not too helpless," warned Daley, flashing a look at Libby Martin. "She'd have blown yuh inside out with that shotgun if I hadn't sneaked up behind her and grabbed her. Women don't have the sense to be scared like a man does. Yuh can't keep 'em from pickin' up a gun or a knife just because yuh got the drop on 'em. Yuh have to be plumb shore there ain't any weapon within their reach. So keep both of 'em under yore eye every minute till I come back. Understand?"

Smiley Cole stirred. "Don't worry none about the woman, Daley," he murmured, never taking his eyes off Libby. "We'll get even with her for that shotgun business."

Daley whirled sharply on the speaker. "Don't yuh dare lay a hand on her!" he snarled savagely. "We're after John Castle's ranch. The boss has his eye on Libby Martin. He'll kill yuh if yuh touch her."

"Mommy," Susan piped up, "what are they talking about? Why did they bring us here?"

"Shhh!" murmured the mother. She looked levelly at Chuck Daley and said: "I don't believe George Reming had anything to do with this."

Daley ignored her. Hawkins glanced sharply at her out of the corner of his eyes and then, oddly enough, chuckled. He returned to the point he was forcing with Daley.

"Yuh said tomorrow, Daley."

"Yes, I said tomorrow," the Rocking R foreman said curtly. "But there might be a hitch in plans. Yuh have to be ready for delays."

"Where is George Reming?" Libby demanded. "Where is my father?"

"Grampa," said the little girl plaintively. "I want my grampa."

Smiley Cole restlessly got up from the bunk.

"Shut that brat up!" he ordered. "I can't stand a whinin' kid."

"Best do as he says, ma'am," advised Hawkins. "Smiley's touchy in funny ways. I'm a-fixin' to cook yuh some supper."

Smiley Cole strode to the door and flung it open to walk out of the house. He halted and stood transfixed at something he saw outside.

"Daley!" he shot out, without turning his head.

Instantly the other two men became alert.

"I don't reckon yuh'll have to go hunt yore boss," Cole said. "Here comes Reming now."

Daley leaped for the door and took one swift look. His face became a mask of mingled incredulity, surprise and rage. Advancing from the edge of the clearing, not fifty feet from the cabin, came the owner of the Rocking R outfit. He was walking steadily, grimly forward, a set expression about his mouth, his hands hanging queerly at his sides.

"Chuck Daley!" he called out in a harsh voice. "I've come for an accountin'!"

Daley thrust Cole violently aside and slammed the door. But not before both of them caught a glimpse of the tall masked and cloaked figure, like the black shadow of doom, emerging from the trees behind Reming.

Daley reached feverishly for the bar to slide across the door. Cole lurched forward and grasped his arm.

"What in tarnation yuh doin'?" grated the blue-eyed killer. "That was the Masked Rider!"

"Let go, yuh fool!" snarled Daley, trying to shake him off.

"But that was the Masked Rider comin' up behind yore boss," Cole cried. "He'll kill him if we don't take a hand."

"Chuck Daley!" came a louder call from outside. "The cabin is surrounded. You men can't get away. Open up and come out peaceable with your hands up!"

"The Masked Rider's in cahoots with Reming!" surmised Hawkins swiftly, spring erect and drawing his guns.

"Each take a window!" ordered Daley in a cool voice. He backed toward the nearest one. "We can shoot blind through the door if they try to rush it."

FOOTSTEPS thudded close outside the door.

"Chuck Daley!" called the relentless voice of George Reming. "Come out, or I'm comin' in after yuh!"

Slim Hawkins leaped to the opposite window and smashed the lower pane with a gun barrel. He triggered one shot along the side of the house. Instantly the upper pane was shattered with a tinkling of glass and a slug buried itself in the log wall above the far window. Hawkins ducked down simultaneously with the echoing *cr-r-rack* of a rifle.

"Get down on the floor, Libby!" shouted Reming from outside.

But Libby Martin needed no such instructions. With Hawkins' pistol shot she had dropped to the floor and was crawling to a corner beyond the rock fireplace, pulling Susan with her. She huddled over the child, shielding the little form with her own body. They lay there, silent, white-faced, and quivering.

"Surrender!" called the deep, harsh voice of the Masked Rider. "Surrender, and it'll go easier for yuh all."

"Huh, I know when I'm licked!" snarled Smiley Cole. "We're trapped and outnumbered. I ain't guilty of much. I'm goin' to give up to yore boss, Daley." He started for the door.

"Stay away from that door!" ordered Daley in a deadly tone. "Reming ain't my boss, yuh fool. I've got no boss."

"Huh?" ejaculated Cole unbelievingly.

Slow of thought, this revelation almost panicked him. Then the sudden creaking of the door from the onslaught of a heavy body decided him. He whirled toward the rear window.

"Trick me, will yuh, yuh dirty skunk!" he yelled. "I'm gettin' out of here. If you come out of this alive, I'll hunt yuh up and fix yuh!"

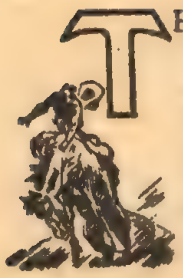
His roving eyes fell upon the huddled form of the woman in the corner. Then his queer blue orbs went completely glassy as he raised his six-shooter and dropped the barrel to level down on the defenseless Libby Martin. Neither Hawkins nor Daley saw this cold-blooded, treacherous act. They were facing the door which was already giving way under the concerted assault of the Masked Rider and the berserk Reming.

Just before Smiley Cole's trigger knuckle whitened, the rear window beside him smashed, and a brawny red arm reached in so that a sinewy red hand could grasp his wrist.

"You say you look for me some time, senor?" panted Blue Hawk.

CHAPTER XVI

Morgan Resigns



THE surprise made Smiley Cole jerk convulsively. The six-shooter blasted in his right hand, with the Indian holding his wrist, harmlessly at the wall above the prone Libby. Simultaneously the mad killer triggered his left-hand gun through the window at the Indian.

But the shot went winging off up the mountainside over Blue Hawk's shoulder. And Smiley Cole never uttered a word in answer to the Indian's challenge. For a man couldn't speak with a hunting knife buried to the hilt in his throat.

The door shuddered inward with a rending crash, and George Reming staggered into the room. With an inarticulate cry of hate, Daley fired one shot at his Nemesis. He missed, because Reming was reeling in his effort to steady himself. Daley had no time for another shot because the irate rancher was upon him then. They closed in mad battle.

The Masked Rider, close on the heels of the Rocking R owner, leaped to one side and flung up his guns to cover the others. From the side Slim Hawkins triggered both his guns from the hip. His gun thunder rocked the room, to be silenced abruptly as bullets shattered both shoulders of the lanky desperado. Slim Hawkins had at last met a faster and better man than himself with a shooting iron.

He staggered backward, lurched against the table, then fell forward on his face to lie there helpless in an agony of pain.

"This time I'm savin' yuh to talk to the judge," the Masked Rider said sternly.

Stepping aside from the gunsmoke, he darted a quick glance around to locate Libby Martin and Susan.

He saw the mother and child huddled in the corner, safe, saw Smiley Cole's body crumpling soddenly to the floor, then whirled to help George Reming. He was just one second late.

The rancher, locked in a terrific struggle with his foreman, had twisted Daley's gun hand down until the weapon was hidden between their bodies. One spurred heel was locked behind Daley's left boot, and the two were falling to the floor as the Masked Rider looked. The cabin shook with the crash, there was a muffled report as the gun went off, a strangled cry, and Chuck Daley went limp.

Gasping and sobbing, George Reming untangled himself and got to his feet.

"I didn't mean to kill him!" he panted. "I wanted to save him for the hangman."

"See after Libby," commanded the Masked Rider, kneeling over Daley.

Bart Henderson and Marshal Lewis came running in through the door.

Daley was still breathing, but he had been fatally wounded. Seeing that nothing could be done for the man, swiftly the Masked Rider searched his pockets and triumphantly held up a torn half-sheet of paper. Marshal Lewis snatched it and held it to the threat note he had brought from Castle's home.

"It matches!" he exclaimed. "So Daley was the culprit himself."

Henderson was examining the wounded Hawkins, holding a bottle of whiskey to the man's lips. Hawkins gulped thirstily, then grinned through his pain.

"Shore he was," he gasped out weakly. "I finally seen through him—just like the lady did. He hired Cole and me to bulldoze Castle, poison his chickens, and get him trapped for a killin'. Daley was the one who put Brown up to that toll-gate idea. He was playin' both ends from the

middle and doublecrossin' everybody."

Libby Martin was sobbing, shaken, half-hysterical, in George Reming's arms.

"I knew you had nothing to do with it, George!" she cried. "I knew you were true blue."

Reming did not answer as he held her closer and reached out with one hand to place it on Susan's pigtailed head and draw the child into the charmed circle.

"Yessir, with the help of the Masked Rider, we've cleaned this mess up," boomed Bart Henderson. "With all that copper ore on the Castle place, and Peter Gregg plumb beggin' to invest bank money in it, Castle and his folks will be mighty well provided for."

But the Masked Rider did not join any of the talk. He remained where he was, a kneeling statue beside the body of Chuck Daley. Daley's eyes had fluttered open, slowly coming in focus on the masked face bending above him.

"You!" he whispered faintly. "The Masked Rider! Curse—yore soul! If only I—hadn't missed—yuh—yesterday mornin'—at Calico Pass!"

He died with these words on his lips.

* * *

IT WAS quiet and peaceful in Sundown. The sun had sunk behind the western panorama of rolling range and sky, and dusk was stealing gently over the landscape as though anxious to obscure the grim little cavalcade approaching town along the south trail.

Pat Gordon was preparing a supper tray to take to Sam Wheeler's office. Upstairs in his sleeping quarters the lawyer sat on his bed, deep in thought. The bandage was gone from his head and only a small white patch gleamed there under the lamplight. At the sound of a step on the landing outside his office, Wheeler raised his head sharply, listened. He stared as a knock sounded on his door.

"Yes?" he called. "Who's there?"

"Just a visitor," answered a deep voice, and the doorknob turned.

On through the law office and into the bedchamber came a figure out of the night. Wheeler stared with widening eyes at the cloaked and masked man who halted in the middle of the room. He let his hand fall unobtrusively to his side and inched it along toward the gun under his pillow.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"You know who I am without me tellin' yuh," said the Masked Rider, in a calm tone. "I just want to talk with yuh a moment, Sam Wheeler, because yuh're the legal counsel for John Castle."

"That's right," admitted Wheeler, relaxing, and smiling slightly. "You gave me a start, coming in like this. Do you always scare people out of their wits?"

"I don't mean to—not the good ones," was the reply. "I've come to tell yuh that yore client will be completely vindicated. This afternoon Marshal Lewis and Bart Henderson apprehended three men for kidnappin' John Castle's daughter and grandchild. They were Smiley Cole, Slim Hawkins—and Chuck Daley."

"What?" exclaimed Wheeler, profoundly startled. "Chuck Daley? You mean George Reming's foreman?"

"Exactly. George Reming was along, by the way. He helped rescue Libby Martin. He was exonerated of all blame because he's been out of the valley for the past three days. He's goin' to marry Libby Martin, I might add. But yuh'll be more interested in the kidnappin' which was done to make John Castle finally give in. Too bad, but two of the three kidnapers got killed."

There was silence for a moment.

"Which two?" the lawyer whispered.

"Smiley Cole," supplied the Masked Rider slowly. "And Chuck Daley."

Wheeler was rigid for a long space, then relaxed and laughed shakily.

"It's almost impossible to believe." he said. "Daley must have been crazy."

"Like a fox," agreed the Masked Rider. "He told me somethin' mighty interestin' just before he died. He apologized for missin' when he tried to drygulch me early yesterday mornin' at Calico Pass."

"I don't understand," said Wheeler, straining his eyes at his visitor.

"Yuh should. If Daley was at Calico Pass firin' at me, he couldn't possibly have been the man in Sundown shootin' Ted Brown and then tryin' to make it look like John Castle had done it."

Sam Wheeler's hand began inching up under the pillow again.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," accused the Masked Rider, "that while Chuck Daley was the active

agent in this dirty scheme, he had a confederate in town. He had to have a pardner in Sundown who had money to finance the deal, who could plan the legal moves, who could do the actual killin' of the victim they'd picked out, who could do all the things that Daley himself could not. I mean that you, Sam Wheeler, shot Ted Brown in the back!"

"This is absurd!" protested the lawyer. "Why, I was almost killed trying to protect Castle from mob violence."

"That's what fooled me. Cole and Hawkins didn't know yuh were in pardnership with Daley."

"You're mad—stark mad!" gurgled Wheeler. "Nobody will believe such a preposterous story!"

"Won't they? Yuh're goin' to confess to it. There's proof right here in yore office files that yuh were in cahoots with Chuck Daley. Yuh've even got that assay report that Henderson made for Daley, provin' that yuh knew copper was under Castle's land. In yore file in a folder under Daley's name—"

THE Masked Rider broke off and hurled himself at the bed as Wheeler made a desperate move to snatch his weapon and gun down his accuser in his tracks. There was a brief struggle, then a sickening sort of snap, like the sound of a breaking twig. Wheeler screamed with pain and fainted dead away from the agony which shot up his broken arm.

The Masked Rider took the lawyer's gun and carried it with him into the outer office. Swiftly he went through the file and picked out the Chuck Daley folder at which he had glanced the night before as Wayne Morgan. Supremely confident of his own security, Wheeler had made no attempt to destroy these papers.

With this folder under his arm, the Masked Rider quietly departed.

Down in the street he encountered the posse which had just arrived in front of the undertaking parlor. He handed the folder to Marshal Lewis.

"Here is the final evidence in the case of the shootin' of Ted Brown," he said. "Guard it with yore life, Marshal Lewis, and see that you and Judge Pelton read the papers in it as soon as possible. Sam Wheeler is the man who killed Brown. If yuh'll go up to his office yuh'll find him ready to deliver himself up to yuh."

Before the Reverend Lewis could get his breath to answer, the Masked Rider turned away and melted into the shadows between two buildings. It was moments before the startled marshal and his companions could recover from their surprise. By then the drumming of heavy hoofs they heard sounded like thunder, gradually dying away in the deepening night. . . .

After a hurried supper Marshal Lewis, Judge Pelton, and Peter Gregg were poring over the mass of evidence in the jail office when the door opened and Wayne Morgan came sauntering in. Freshly shaved, and well-fed, he was the picture of a refreshed and indolent deputy.

"Morgan!" exclaimed Lewis angrily. "Where on earth have you been? Everything but a flood has occurred—and you've been snoring away in bed."

"Seein' as yuh've answered yoreself, Marshal," drawled Morgan, "I don't reckon I need to say anything."

"Man, you were right about Daley!" cried Judge Pelton. "It's amazin'. But Reming seems to have been innocent."

"Let me tell you what's happened," went on Lewis. "Daley and Cole are dead and Hawkins is all smashed up at Doc Chandler's house. Wheeler's in jail and—"

"So I've heard," interrupted Morgan lazily. "Pat Gordon just gave me all the gory details over at the restaurant. What I came in for was to say that I reckon yuh can get along without me to play jailer from now on. So I guess I'll resign and be driftin' along. Here's my badge. And thanks for the valuable trainin'. Sorry I didn't get around to the preachin', or to countin' money for you, Mr. Gregg. *Adios.*"

"But—but—" spluttered the marshal.

Wayne Morgan paused on the threshold.

"By the way, Marshal," he said, "if yuh'd like a pet for the jail—or you, Mr. Gregg, for the bank—Pat Gordon's cat has a nice litter of kittens."

With this cryptic remark he went out into the night, leaving three puzzled citizens staring after him blankly. But what was more to the point, before Wayne Morgan and the faithful Blue Hawk hit the trail for the next horizon, the Masked Rider stopped by the homestead at Calico Pass long enough to leave a little blue-eyed kitten with a little brown-eyed girl.

As crimson flashed from the killer's guns, a black streak leaped straight for Frost

TRIGGER FINGERS

By BURL TUTTLE

Young Lee Gartell's bluff is better than a royal flush to top the hand of the crooked gambler who ruined his father!

IT WAS dusk. In the near west purple shadows were creeping from the Chiracahuas. The first star of the evening hung over the towering mountains like a jewel placed there. To the south a streamer of gray ran along the edge of the land—river vapor released from the pressing heat.

The desert still shimmered from the day's sun as the train thundered across Arizona, toward the mountains. Tobacco smoke fogged around the heads of the four poker players in the seats at the end of the coach.

Lee Gartell, just past nineteen, kept a blue-eyed stare slanted over his father's shoulder, watching the game. The stakes were heavy. Lee knew that before day-

break one of those four poker players would own Pinto Basin.

A furtive signal passed between the hard-eyed cattlemen who were playing against "Curley" Gartell. Lee leaned forward.

"Watch 'em, Dad," he whispered. "Monty Neuff switched in a cold deck!"

Curley Gartell shifted his gun-belt, speared a player named "Shorty" Biggs with a glance that caused the flat-faced rider to cringe. He and his boss, "Bud" Leeters, a round-jowled man with crimson face, threw in their cards. They sat there, tense as a couple of unbroken colts in a set of new harness. Monty Neuff, gambler, cattle dealer and water rights king of Pinto Basin, looked up and gave Curley a frosty smile from lips that were set and thin, like a gash across a wooden face.

"There's no use in playin' all night," he said.

Curley Gartell nodded. "Let's make this a show-down hand, Neuff. Shove in what yuh've got. Yuh'll own my Flat Iron spread and the water rights on Squaw Creek, or I'll bust you flat and take over your big B U G outfit and the rest of yore holdin's in Pinto Basin."

The gambler took a careful look at the cards he held, frowned slightly, and shoved in his chips. It looked to young Lee as though Neuff was greatly troubled because Curley Gartell was plunging so wildly on three kings that had come off the top of that cold deck, before anybody made the draw. Lee wondered about his dad, too.

"I'll play these," Curley Gartell said and smiled coolly.

Monty Neuff's own smile disappeared. He slammed his discards on the table and announced he would take one card.

"Put that deck on the table and take yore card off the top," Curley Gartell ordered sharply.

Lee almost laughed when he realized what his dad had done to that gambling man. The deck must have been stacked so that Gartell would draw two cards to help those three kings he held. The card that might have given Monty Neuff the winning hand was the third from the top of the deck. The tinhorn couldn't get it now.

"Can yuh beat three kings?" Curley Gartell asked softly.

Neuff smiled tightly, began turning his cards over one at a time, naming each one.

"Jack of clubs," he said, "Ten of clubs—nine of clubs—eight of clubs—and the joker!"

LEE got a glimpse of that last card. It was not the joker, but the trey of hearts. The real joker was a double-barreled derringer that suddenly appeared in Monty Neuff's hand, thundering out death.

That treacherous bullet drove Curley Gartell back against the seat cushions. He died without drawing his guns. Passengers came to their feet, astounded. They filled the aisle. Monty Neuff pitched the playing board into the aisle, scattering chips and cards in all directions. Then the conductor was there on the run, hurling questions.

"He went for his guns when I caught him cheatin'," Monty Neuff said coolly. "My two friends here will bear witness to that."

"That's a lie!" Lee cried, tears in his eyes as he challenged the gambler defiantly. "Monty Neuff killed my dad in cold blood! I saw the whole thing!"

"And I saw *you* slip that cold deck from under the table and pass it to yore crooked pa!" Bud Leeters declared. "A young sidewinder like you ought to be in jail!"

The conductor motioned Lee Gartell back into the seat.

"Stay there!" he ordered. "We'll let the sheriff take care of yuh when this train gets to Newton." He smiled at Monty Neuff, the killer.

Nobody saw Lee slip the hand-tooled gun-belt from around his father's waist. With it buckled around his own waist, he watched his chance. Suddenly he was out of his seat, leaping for the vestibule. A passenger grabbed at him, but missed. Somebody else shouted for him to halt. But already Lee was in the vestibule, clinging to the hand-rail as he stood on the bottom step, listening to the wheels clicking over the rails as the train sped on through the night.

He had to take a chance, had to get away! It would be his turn next. What he had seen in Monty Neuff's eyes had

told him that as plainly as words. With Neuff wanting Curley Gartell's Flat Iron spread the way he did, the gambler would not let any nineteen-year-old boy stand in his way. And Lee knew he could not hope to fight Monty and the two men with him—and come out alive.

Abruptly he leaped out into the black gulf of darkness. He struck the ground rolling, the breath knocked out of him. He sprawled there, battered and bruised, gasping. When he finally could stagger to his feet, the tail-lights of the train were disappearing in the distance.

As the moon broke from behind a cloud, he took his bearings. The blue-ridged Chiracahuas were in the distance, pale and ghostly. He headed in that direction, for there was the trail back to Pinto Basin.

The vegetation was scant, through this long stretch of hard-packed sand, and the going hard. But for two days he traveled on, his high-heeled boots a torture at every step. He ate mesquite beans for his meals. Occasionally, he found a tepid water-hole, scummed with green stagnation, filled with the droppings of cattle. Before he reached the hill country, he felt a great weariness throughout his tortured young body.

Along toward sundown of that second day, he headed up a small stream through a gorge in the hills. "Pop" Rood, a shirt-tail cowman, had a place in a small valley further up the stream. Pop was a kindly old man, who had been driven from Pinto Basin by Bud Leeters five years before. The hard-bitten oldster and his daughter, Sally, lived here now, where a craggy ridge offered a wall of safety between them and their enemies in Pinto Basin.

Lee took off his boots, waded along the sandy-bottomed creek. The water cooled his tired feet. Night had fallen when he reached the clearing where Rood's small cabin stood. The house bulked low and dark against the hillside.

Lee called out, and a man came into the yard.

"I'm Lee Gartell, Pop," Lee called.

A great black dog streaked across the yard, growling menacingly.

"Dang yore hide, Satan!" Pop Rood threatened. "Let the boy alone!"

Lee reached out his hand to stroke the dog's black head. Jaws snapped and white fangs clicked. A girl materialized from the darkness.

"My goodness!" she gasped. "Satan will bite your hand off!"

Lee talked softly to the dog until the animal wagged its tail. Then he reached down and put his hand on Satan's head. Again the powerful jaws snapped, teeth clicking, but those fangs did not bury themselves in that friendly hand. Satan lay down flat, whining softly.

"I don't understand why he didn't bite you," Sally cried, amazed.

Lee shook hands with her, his eyes admiring her slender blond loveliness.

"Dogs like me," he said, and her blue eyes brightened in the moonlight. "Sally," he declared, "yuh're prettier'n ever."

"Flatterer!" she said, flushing. "Have you had anything to eat, Lee?"

WHILE Lee ate the food Sally prepared for him, he told her and her father about the killing of his own father and his escape from the train.

"I'll get 'em, though," he threatened dourly. "I'll kill all three of them snakes!"

Pop gave him a level look. "Son, yuh're bitter now, and nobody can blame yuh, but yuh got to remember that the law will catch up with them killers. No man has a right to seek vengeance against another his ownself." After a thoughtful moment he added, "Leastwise he ain't got no right to try till he's full growed, and has gun savvy enough to stand up against sidewinders."

Lee knew Pop Rood was right, but he was determined on his course. He meant to acquire gun savvy—plenty of it. Early the next morning he went out back of the pole corral and began practising shooting. Never before had he cared about being expert with guns, but he meant to make up for that oversight now.

He put away the twin .45s when Pop started harnessing old Snorter, a big loco roan that kept rearing and pawing.

"Snorter is a lot like a man," Pop said philosophically. "Mighty mean and plenty ornery, but there's always a way to handle a bad one—when yuh got the savvy."

Snorter quivered, flared his nostrils, when Pop touched him. The roan's eyes rolled back, ears flattened. He bared his teeth, pawed. Pop eased a bridle on over the halter. The horse reared, lashed out

with forefeet. Pop talked persuasively, walked along the rope until he was close enough to stroke the animal's neck. After a lot of coaxing, he got old Snorter hooked up to a plow. Then he headed for the field.

"Yuh got to be patient with men and hosses," old Pop had declared. "Old Snorter raises a lot of trouble on account of he's been mistreated sometime back in the past. Mebbe he's lookin' for vengeance. Mebbe he's just plain scared. Anyhow, a man or a hoss fights back if they're scared enough."

Those words stuck in Lee Gartell's memory, made an impression, but they failed to banish any of the hatred in his heart all summer. He helped with the crop, and when fall came he helped Sally and Pop harvest the grain and potatoes. They stored everything away in the lean-to and in an earthen cellar behind the cabin.

"Why do you wear those old guns all the time?" Sally asked Lee. "You're always out behind the corral, shooting at things—just as if Pop hadn't already taught you what's right and what's wrong!"

"I got a right to do what I want," Lee replied dryly.

She tossed her blond head. "Lee Gartell, if you ever shoot a man, I'll hate you!" she declared hotly.

He walked away from her, a crimson tide of anger creeping over his face.

She began to ignore him after that, to be silent when in his presence. That made him fighting mad. He stopped her in the yard one evening.

"I've never seen a girl like you!" he said. "Yuh fussed at me all the time about my gun practise, calling me trigger fingers, among a few pet names. Now yuh go around like a sick calf, with hurt in your eyes like I'd done somethin' bad to yuh. Actin' like that is a danged sight worse than havin' yuh fussin' at me, Sally!"

Her small nose crinkled and she stared at him with round blue eyes.

"Gosh, Lee," she said, "you're so filled up with hatred that you've just about lost all human feeling. You're always looking like you won't be satisfied until you've killed a man or two and avenged your father. You scare me! You're only going to get yourself killed. Why don't you wait, Lee—like Dad says?"

"Some of these days mebbe yuh'll know just how I feel about my dad," he said tightly.

He stalked into the cabin and pulled up in front of the full-length mirror in his bedroom. For a moment, he observed his own reflection in the glass, saw the lean young fellow—twenty, now—standing there, tight-lipped, and solemn with the bitterness which possessed him. He suddenly lurched forward, balanced on the balls of his feet. His hands swept down to the twin holsters, came up filled with guns in a movement as smooth as oil on leather.

That was his speed draw, a thing he had practised hundreds of times before this mirror in the big wardrobe door. He had found that if he kept his right foot braced slightly behind him, with his body teetered forward in a slight crouch, he could twist around on the balls of his feet like a flash and be facing in the opposite direction almost without effort. Some day, if he had to turn around in a hurry to kill a man behind him, he would put that trick to its proper use.

Sally had told him he was gun-crazy. She had tossed her little chin in the air and paid no attention when he had tried to explain that a man's life sometimes depended on the swiftness of his draw.

"If you're just bound to be a killer, I guess you'll be one!" she had told him.

THERE was just one thing that troubled Lee. He practised every day, but he had never been able to combine his fast draw with accurate shooting. One morning, he stood out behind the corral, trying hard to perfect that one defect in his marksmanship. With lightning speed, he made his draw, squeezing the triggers of the guns when they came up.

Thunder echoed across the valley. Lee looked through powdersmoke at the tin bucket he had placed on a corral post. His lips set hard and tight when he saw that no bullet-hole dented the target. He tried again and missed.

That morning he had shot up a full box of precious cartridges. The only time he put bullets in that bucket was when he drew his guns slowly, took careful aim, and banged away. He knew well enough

that a gunman had to be faster than that!

About noontime, Sally came out to watch the gun practise. She stood there, laughing. On Lee's face a storm cloud appeared.

"What yuh laughin' about?" he demanded.

"You missed it every time!" she cried gleefully.

"And that's a laughin' matter, I reckon! I can hit the blame thing when I level down and take right good aim!"

Pop Rood walked up and chipped in with one of his usual observations.

"While yuh was takin' slow, deliberate aim, son, a real killer would shoot yuh full of holes. I wish yuh'd stop this fool gun business and settle down to farmin', or begin thinkin' of startin' yoreself a little cow outfit."

Sally looked up at her father. "You can make him stop if you get the judge over at Pinto City to make you his legal guardian," she suggested.

Lee Gartell jerked as if he had been kicked by a bronc.

"You goin' to Pinto City?" he demanded.

Pop nodded. "Got to put in some winter supplies, son. And I thought if I was yore legal guardian I might file a court claim against Bud Leeters and Monty Neuff and get back the water rights and cattle spread they stole off yore dad when they killed him. I've got a lot of faith in courts." He eyed the boy steadily. "Yuh think yuh could take care of Sally while I'm gone?"

"Shucks!" Lee spat out. "A man couldn't take them varmints into no court. They'd kill him first, and you know it. But if yuh want to try it, I'll shore take care of the place while yuh're gone."

He felt a man's responsibility, having Sally and the entire outfit turned over to him, when Pop Rood hooked up a wagon and headed across the ridges toward the county seat.

Three weeks passed, and Pop had not returned. The weather changed, with harsh, bleak wind whistling down from the mountains. The first snow fell one night, drifted four feet deep against the pole corral. When Lee went out to the chicken house to gather some eggs, he saw the trail of small animal tracks imbedded in the snow. His eyes brightened with anticipation.

"'Coon tracks!" he cried. "I'm goin' to teach that old hellion!"

He built a box-trap and baited it with a piece of raw beef. Trying to trap that raccoon took his mind off Pop Rood's strange absence for the next few days. Sally was with him on the morning that he looked into the box and found the little animal inside, snarling up at him.

Lee put a chain around the raccoon's neck, began teasing Satan. He made the dog lie down, while he rubbed the raccoon over him. Satan growled viciously, but made no attempt to bite the boy.

Sally reached for the raccoon. "Oh, Lee, isn't he cute!"

The raccoon snapped at her and she drew back, startled.

"Gosh, he's wild!"

"We'll name him Old Ringtail," Lee decided, "and make a pet out of him."

It took four weeks to tame Old Ringtail so that it was not necessary to keep him chained to a post. The 'coon had the freedom of the house. He was company for the girl, and that was a mighty good thing, Lee thought. Because Sally was worried, kept wondering why her father had not returned to the valley. There were shadows in her blue eyes during those long days. During her waking hours, she kept her glance glued to the trail that led across the bridge.

"Yuh don't need do no worryin' about Pop Rood," Lee would tell her. "That old scamp will be home when he gets home. He prob'ly knows blamed well that things are runnin' all right, with me in charge."

But Lee was worried himself, though he did not let Sally know. One afternoon, he was up on the slope, cutting some firewood, when he saw a lanky rider coming up the creek trail on a scrawny roan. The man dismounted at the cabin, went inside. Lee hurried back down the slope to investigate. When he reached the house, he paused, hearing Sally inside, sobbing softly. He heard the man's gruff voice.

Lee made no noise as he stepped inside the door and stopped, tense.

The lanky man turned to look at Lee with eyes that were as cold as the glint of black agates. Crossed gun-belts girded his spindly middle, holding guns tied low. A crooked smile flicked the mouth that opened like a cavern in a vulture's face

beneath the man's flop-brimmed black Stetson.

"I'm Buck Frost," he announced. "I recken you're the feller I've come to get."

SALLY stepped between them.

"He's a killer, Lee—one of the worst that ever worked for Bud Leeters!" she cried.

Lee had heard of the man.

"What yuh want with me?" Lee asked, in a deadly soft voice.

"They've got Dad in jail, charged with cattle stealing and killing!" Sally cried. "This—this lobo just told me all about it, bragged about it. Said we couldn't do anything about it, because it would only be our word against theirs! They're going to hang Dad on evidence Bud Leeters has cooked up against him! Dad tried to take legal action and get your property back through the courts, Lee. Now they're going to stop him, they'll stop you, too, Lee!" There was a sob in her voice that drew tears to her eyes.

"Buck" Frost grinned wolfishly. "Yuh oughtn't to have made such a fuss over the two-bit cow outfit yore father lost in that poker game," he said softly. "Sendin' an old man to town to start trouble agin Monty Neuff and Bud Leeters has got yuh into a mighty big mess, looks like. Thought till Pop showed up, young Gartell, that yuh'd cashed yoreself in when yuh jumped off that train. Should of stayed dead."

Lee knew—and so did Sally—that Buck Frost had been sent here to kill him, Lee Gartell. With Pop Rood hanged on false evidence, and Curley Gartell's only heir killed by a gunman, there would be nobody left to dispute the claim of Bud Leeters and Monty Neuff to the outfit they had stolen from a dead man.

What they wanted most was the water rights on Squaw Creek. With the water rights in their hands, they could control Pinto Basin, drive out all the little fellows below the Flat Iron spread and take over their land and cattle. The fate of the honest men depended on Lee Gartell's living.

Lee realized as much, but he knew he faced a cold-blooded professional killer, a man who could flip a gun from a holster and hit whatever he chose.

Lee did not believe there was a man in Arizona who could beat his own lightning-fast draw. But what good was a speedy draw when a man could not hit a thing unless he took slow, deliberate aim?

Over near one wall, Satan sprawled, watching the stranger closely. A low growl rumbled in the dog's throat. Old Ringtail, the 'coon, came into the room, walked over and sniffed Buck Frost's boots. The killer lashed out with a booted foot, sent the little animal smashing against the wall. Ringtail got up, dazed and limping. In that moment, Lee Gartell forgot he could not hit the side of a barn with a six-gun unless he took slow aim.

"Yuh busted Old Ringtail's leg!" he bellowed, digging for his guns.

Buck Frost's grin vanished and his hands dipped for holsters.

"Oh, Lee, he's going to kill you!" Sally screamed.

"Get him, Satan!" Lee cried desperately.

His draw was like a streak of lightning, his guns thundered. Through the powder smoke he knew that he had failed to hit Buck Frost. Just as crimson flashed from the killer's guns, a black streak came up from the floor, leaping straight for Frost. Satan's growl sounded.

The killer's bullets ranged upward, pounded through the roof of the cabin. The man went down, and Satan's jaws closed like a vise in a throat hold. It was all over before Lee could save the man.

Sally stood there trembling, numb.

"We'll bury him tonight," Lee announced calmly. "That'll be better than him buryin' us."

"Yes, Lee—you know best," Sally said, then added in a tight voice, "I wish I hadn't laughed at you when you wanted to be a gunman. Somebody else will come for you, now, Lee. I'm so frightened I don't know what to do!"

They planted the dead outlaw in an icy grave near the corral that night, then went back to the cabin. There before the fireplace, looking into the flames, Lee said: "Sally, if I'd ever learned how to be a killer, I'd be ridin' on my way to town to kill some snakes and save Pop from hangin'." He did not look at her.

"Why, aren't you going to even lift a hand to save Pop?" she gasped. "Lee, are you a coward?"

He studied her, saw the look of contempt that came into her eyes.

"Outlaws like Buck Frost usually run in pairs," he announced gravely. "I'd hate to think what would happen if Buck's pard got you, and I got killed. I think I'll stay right here and see that you're safe."

Sally's eyes brimmed full and she choked when she tried to speak. Finally, words came out that indicated she had grown up a lot since the sun had gone down that evening.

"You'd be useless in a fight with a killer, if one did come!" she said scornfully.

"Pop had the right idea," he said softly, "about fightin' 'em in courts. I won't kill a man unless I've just got to do it. But when Buck Frost's pard shows up, I'll do my best."

Buck Frost's partner arrived on a claybank two days later. Sally and Lee were out at the corral. The girl saw the rider first, and gripped Lee's arm.

"That's Bill Grimes!" she said in desperation. "Oh, Lee, he's a terrible killer!"

"Call Satan and stay out of sight," Lee ordered quietly.

The girl did not obey. She stood there beside Lee, watching Grimes ride up and stop.

"I'm lookin' for Buck Frost, a pard of mine," he growled. "Seen him around?" His tobacco-stained lips twisted in a snarl when his glance locked with Lee's.

LEE braced his right foot slightly behind him, hunkered forward. He was ready to make his speed draw, hoping he could hit his target without taking slow aim.

"Buck Frost is planted over there in that grave," he drawled. "I put him there the other night. Buck got just what he come lookin' for."

No snow had fallen since they had buried the outlaw. The raw earthen mound showed up like a brown scar against the whiter background. Bill Grimes frowned darkly when he looked at the grave.

"Must have shot Buck in the back if yuh put him there," he finally said sneeringly.

"Nope, mister, I didn't shoot him in the back," Lee stated truthfully. It was all right with him, if Bill Grimes wanted to believe that he had killed Buck Frost. "I wouldn't shoot no man in the back."

"Buck was the fastest gun-slammer in Arizona," the outlaw declared. "No slick-chinned younker could of shot him down."

Sally drew in a hard breath, stifled a cry.

Bill Grimes swung down from saddle. The flinty gleam in his eyes warned Lee. He moved with the precision of a man who had self-confidence.

"Buck had orders to bring in yore ornery scalp," he growled, glaring at Lee from beneath shaggy gray eyebrows. "I recken I'll have to do the job. Get set, feller!"

Bill Grimes' hands slapped leather.

Lee Gartell made a draw with a speed that was astounding. His guns came up leveled before the older man's cleared their holsters. Grimes was a quick thinker. He turned loose of his gun butts as if they burned his hands. For a moment, he stood there, hands clear of holsters, his rocky eyes flared wide with surprise and alarm. His beard-bristled face blanched white.

Without a word, he turned and swung into saddle. A great sigh oozed from him. He took out a red bandanna and mopped his forehead.

"Sufferin' snakes," he breathed. "I never seen such speed!"

Lee holstered his guns. He could not understand for a moment. Then he realized that a bluff had won. The lightning speed of his draw had chilled Bill Grimes.

"When yuh get back to Pinto City," he drawled softly, "yuh can pass the word around that I'm comin' in to see Pop Rood and side him. Who is he accused of killin', anyhow—and whose cows did he steal, if any?"

"A man lives longer if he keeps his mouth shut," Bill Grimes eyed Lee piercingly. "But I recken it won't hurt to tell you that Pop Rood killed Shorty Biggs when Shorty caught him chousin' some cows off Bud Leeters' B U G outfit."

Mention of the name of the man who had been in on the killing of his father stirred hot blood in Lee.

"Shorty Biggs," he murmured. "So he finally got what he's had comin' for a long time now!"

"I reckon the boys'll understand what yuh mean when I tell 'em yuh're comin'

in to help Pop Rood," Bill Grimes said. "I won't forget to mention, too, that yuh've got the fastest lightnin' draw in all Arizona. I've got to mention it, on account of I'd be plumb shamed out of the state, otherwise—me gettin' took in like that!"

He reined his horse around and headed up the slope.

Lee let loose a breath of relief. "I was scared he might stick around and call for another show-down," he admitted. "Sally, I reckon I *am* a coward, because I'm still tremblin' inside."

She smiled up at him. "Gee, Lee, I'm scared, too."

"Scared or not," he told her, "we're goin' to Pinto City and try to work that fast-draw bluff on the rest of that crew of killers."

She clutched his arm, desperation in her blue eyes.

"What if they don't bluff!" she cried.

He squeezed her hands. "In that case, honey, I'll just take slow, deliberate aim and trust to luck and mebbe kill myself some men," he promised. "So I guess we'd better saddle up and head for Pop. . . ."

Ranchers, cowboys and townsmen were gathered in the courthouse square that morning when Lee and Sally rode into town. Everybody was waiting for Pop Rood's trial to begin. Lee tied their horses to the rack, headed for the brick courthouse. A man stopped him before he had gone ten feet.

"They'll bring in a verdict of guilty," he said. "Then they'll gunsmoke yore carcass, feller. Yuh'd better hightail back to wherever yuh come from. I reckon yuh know Pop's been framed on that rustlin' charge. There's rumor that one of the gang bushwhacked Shorty Biggs out at Bud Leeters' spread. They wanted him out of the way, on account of Shorty had talked a lot about the poker game on the train when yore dad got killed. Seems Shorty was tryin' to make Bud Leeters pay him off to keep his big mouth shut. Leeters prob'ly paid him in bushwhack lead, then put the killin' on Pop Rood. That's the talk, anyhow, but it won't save Pop's neck when them lyin' witnesses take the stand."

Lee gave the townsman a cool look. "Who are the witnesses that say they caught Pop rustlin' Bud Leeters' cows, and who seen Pop kill Shorty Biggs?"

THE man glanced furtively up and down the street.

"Buck Frost and Bill Grimes are the ones. They're both killers, but the jury'll take their words. Pop ain't got no witnesses, yuh see."

"Buck Frost won't never take the stand against nobody," Lee said proudly. "If I'd known this, Bill Grimes would have been in the grave beside the one Buck is fillin' now." He strode on.

"Look out, son!" somebody cried. "Here comes Bud Leeters—dangerous as a bobtailed rattler."

Lee and the girl advanced slowly toward the big range hog who had just pulled up in his tracks, red-rimmed eyes bulged wide with surprise. Lee got braced with his right foot behind him. In a partial crouch, he faced the man he hated. And he knew he could not miss now at such a short range.

"Leeters," he said grimly, "start tellin' the truth about who killed Shorty Biggs. Else start diggin' for them guns yuh're wearin'."

Leeters shot a glance past Lee.

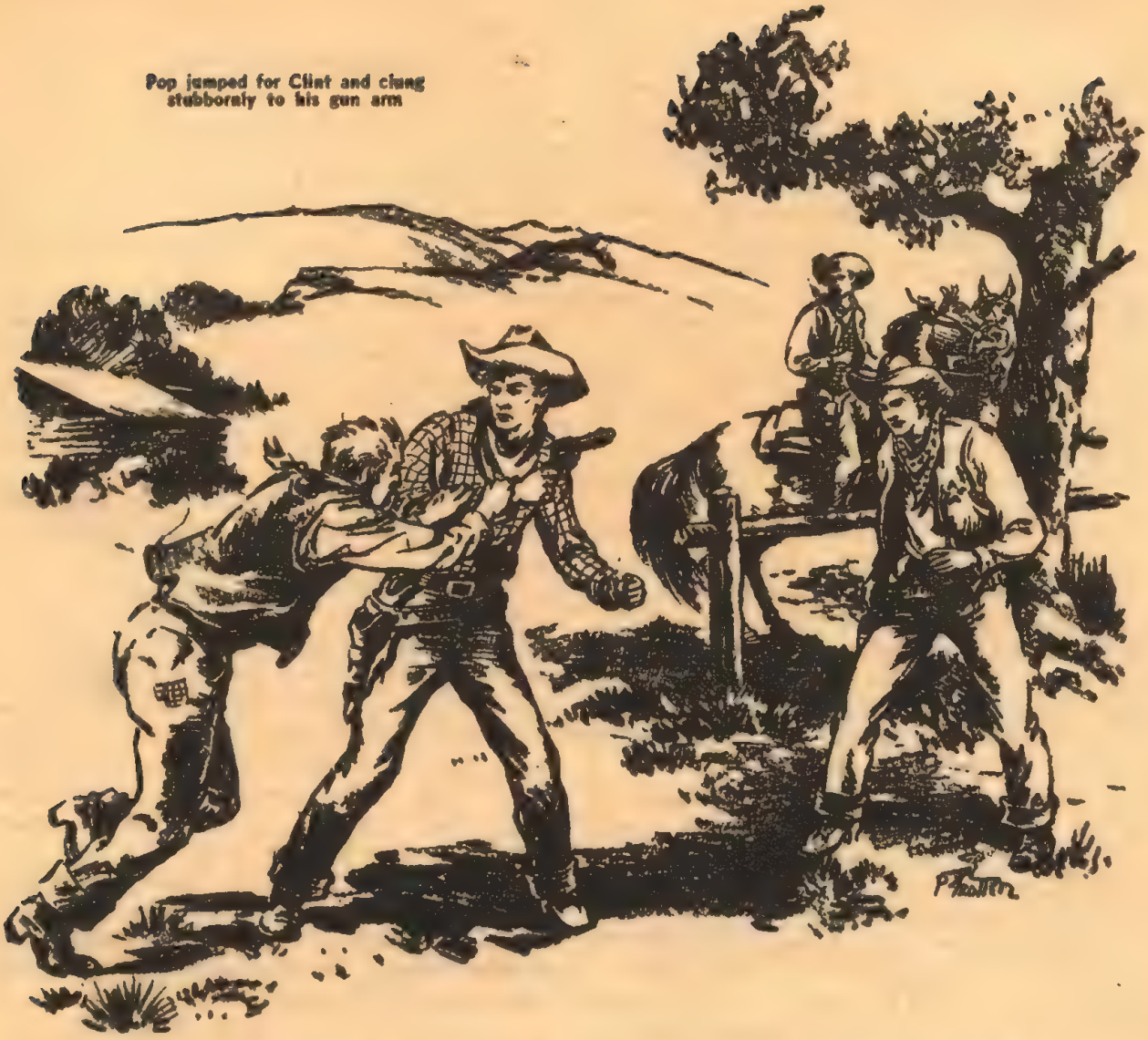
"Look out, Lee!" a bystander cried. "Here comes the rest of the curly wolves!"

Bud Leeters' pudgy hands slashed for his holsters, but Lee's guns came up, belching death. Those bullets pounded straight and true into the man's bulky body. Lee pivoted on the balls of his feet, using the trick he had practised before the full length mirror at the Rood cabin. Monty Neuff, Bill Grimes and a gun-hung stranger were bearing down on him. His twin .45s spoke again, and the gambler went down, drilled center at that short distance.

The stranger ran into the nearby crowd, disappeared, but Bill Grimes had faced Lee Gartell's guns before. He froze in his tracks, raised his hands.

"Don't seem like there's any need in me lyin' now, hombre," he declared. "I ain't got nothin' personal agin' Pop Rood. I worked for Bud Leeters and drew his gunpay while he was alive. But there's nobody left to pay wages now. So I don't mind sayin' Pop Rood didn't steal no cattle, and that Bud Leeters killed Shorty Biggs hisself, on account of Shorty talked

(Concluded on page 113)



Pop jumped for Clint and clung stubbornly to his gun arm

PRODIGAL FATHER

By RICHARD BRISTER

Pop Childreth finds his long lost sons Clint and George, only to see them battling each other in a bitter feud!

POP CHILDRETH rode into Converse on a swaybacked dun mare. The old horse was bony, down-headed, and draggy of foot, a trail-weary ghost of the prancing filly she once had been. In this respect, Pop thought gloomily, the dun matched her rider. Pop was getting along, and the gypsy years of shuttling from one cow outfit to another lay heavily on his rounded shoulders.

He dropped the mare's reins over the hitchrack in front of an unpainted frame building labeled simply enough, THE LEGAL TENDER, and marched through the door on rickety legs, his moist gray eyes blinking against the darkness.

There was a cluster of weather-bitten cowboys ranged at the long mahogany

bar. Pop met their curious glances with a sheepish grin—he was a worn-out old drifter now, and he realized he looked it—and lifted a gnarled finger to attract the bartender.

The bartender moved down the line toward him. "What's yours, old-timer?"

Pop fingered the thin trickle of small change in his worn Levis pocket. "Old Crow—beer chaser."

The liquor burned fiercely, going down, and the cool beer was a welcome relief from that burning sensation. Now, at sixty-six, he had lost his resistance to the stuff, and generally, it didn't take much to warm his thin blood and to buck up his spirits.

But though the day was blistering hot, the raw liquor failed to affect him. He was an old, old man. Years of bone-bruising labor for half a hundred different employers had aged him too soon, he realized. Long damply-cold nights riding herd had left him rheumatic, crippled, ready for the discard.

He was about broke again, in need of a job. With his hair silver white, with his boots streaked and gashed from too-long usage, his range clothes in tatters, who would want to hire Pop Childreth?

"Any chance of a job hereabouts?" He glanced up hopefully at the bartender.

The man wiped big hands on his greasy apron, and a half-smile creased his flat features. His gaze went up and down Pop's rickety frame.

"What kind of a job was you meaning, Pop? We might use a swamper."

AT THIS Pop's bony shoulders straightened and he flung his white head back with an impatient snort.

"I been punchin' cattle for forty-two years, in purty nigh every state in the Union."

"Take it easy, Pop." The bartender shrugged. "No call to get proddy, just becuz I suggested swampin'." He fingered the red stubble that peppered his slack chin. "Yuh might try your luck at the Doule C Circle, come to think of it. I've heard Clint Childreth's been takin' on new hands, out there. Clint's a right big-handed sort, and—"

He stopped, for Pop Childreth was staring at the bartender with a slack expression.

"Clint *who*—was you sayin'?"

The man in back of the bar looked baffled. "Childreth. What's the matter, Pop? Yuh act like yuh seen a ghost or something. Name of Childreth mean somethin' to yuh, does it?"

Pop took a deep gulp of his beer before he replied.

"It might," he said cagily, trying to stem the rush of whirling hopes and doubts in his spinning brain. "I—uh—I once knowed a feller by that name. Twenty-five year ago, that was, down to Texas. Sort of took me back some, when you said it."

The bartender nodded. The curiosity drained out of his eyes. His voice droned on flatly.

"I know how that is. Look, mebbe this here's the same feller, though he'd of been mighty young twenty-five years ago. Don't reckon Clint'd be more'n forty today. Then there's George Childreth—that's Clint's older brother. He's the Law, here in Converse." The man watched Pop's face. "This feller you know have a brother George, did he? Reckon that ought to cinch it."

Pop nodded absently, hardly hearing the question. A strange tightness crowded his chest, and he could feel his moist eyes filming over. He'd always known he'd locate the boys somewhere, some time.

His heart jumped at the thought of seeing his two sons again, after all these long years. Pop had married at nineteen, and raised the boys up on a little spread of his own, down in the Panhandle. He had worked hard, had built up the ranch to a good-paying proposition, but the biggest mistake of his life, he had finally realized, had been in his choice of a wife.

Emma had been a Tartar, a tongue-wagging shrew. She had driven him unmercifully, day and night. Nothing he did had seemed to please her, nothing stemmed the rush of criticism from her carping tongue.

Pop had finally had all he could stomach. He had simply run out on the party, one dark night. It didn't bother his conscience too much. The ranch was clear when he left. There was a fine herd of cattle ranging the pastures. The boys, nineteen-year-old George and fifteen-year-old Clint, were both expert cowhands, and were capable of taking things

over and showing a profit.

Pop had drifted north to Montana, then west to Arizona, taking what jobs he could find. Five years later he had drifted back to the old ranch to see how the boys had made out without him.

He learned that Emma had taken pneumonia and died, during his absence. The boys had sold the ranch and drifted, no one knew where.

Pop never had located them,, until this moment. He felt pretty certain he had found them now, though. Coincidence could hardly explain the presence of two brothers named George and Clint Childreth in this town of Converse, Wyoming.

He grinned happily at the bartender. "That'd be the same feller, I reckon. Yuh say Clint Childreth owns the Double C Circle? Clint's doin' all right for himself, hey?"

The barman's eyes dropped and uncomfortable silence unfolded like a carpet between them.

"Don't know jest how to answer that one, old-timer. S'pose yuh ride out and see for your— Whup!" His eyes flicked up as a tall, brown-burnt figure moved past the small window that faced on the dusty street. "There goes the marshal right now. Wait here, friend."

The man ran around the end of the bar, slipped hurriedly past the batwings, placed thick fingers between his teeth, and emitted a piercing whistle.

"George! Can yuh spare a minute?"

POP shifted uneasily, watching the reflection of the tall, darkly handsome man who came in from the street with the friendly barman. He caught the glint of the badge on the big fellow's vest, and he turned around slowly, his heart thumping hard, to face the man who had once instilled a father's pride in him.

The bartender fussed like a hen, enjoying his intermediary's role. He waved his thick hand from one to the other. "This here's Marshal George Childreth, friend. He was just sayin' he used to know Clint, George, from down Texas way. Which is how come I called yuh."

"Thanks, Jake," said the lawman agreeably. He smiled a friendly greeting toward Pop, extending a heavy brown hand. "Right pleased to exchange 'Howdy's with any Texas man, pardner. You say you knew Clint, down in Texas?"

Pop nodded shakily. He kept watching George's face. His oldest son had changed. Still, Pop would have known George in a crowd, right off. George's brown hair was sparsing up some across his wide forehead. Crowsfeet dimpled the edges of his direct gray eyes, and he'd turned from a slender youngster into a heavy-set middle-aged man. But he was the same stolid, dependable George, Pop realized.

"I knew Clint," he faltered.

"When was that?" George was making talk. "How'd you happen to meet him?"

Pop felt kind of sad. He supposed it was too much to have expected George to take one sharp look at his face and recognize him. The hard years had knocked a lot of meat off the stout frame Pop had carried twenty-five years back. His face had leaned some, and wrinkles had changed his expression. Loss of his once fine mouthful of teeth had lifted his jawline, and he'd grown stooped. He didn't look a bit like the Pop Childreth young George had known, in those long ago days, and now he realized it.

He felt like saying, "Look at me close, boy. Don't you recognize your old pappy?" Somehow, the words didn't come. He was a beaten old man, ragged, dirty, prime for the discard. George looked prosperous, dignified, important, as befitted a lawman in the town he ramrodded.

It wouldn't help George any, Pop thought darkly, to have folks in this town see George's father walk in suddenly on him, an old derelict of the desert. Twenty-five years ago Pop had walked out on the boys, leaving them to look after themselves. His own stubborn pride wouldn't let him come dragging back to them now, a bedraggled old scarecrow, asking for charity.

"Met young Clint down to Dallas at a Stockman's Convention," he said cautiously. "We kilt a couple of ryes together, that was all. But Clint was such a downright agreeable feller, I never did forget him."

George nodded. A brooding expression flashed briefly in his gray eyes, then vanished abruptly.

"Clint always did make friends mighty easy. He's sort of a wild, reckless gent,

quick to grin and quick to show his hot temper. But pretty near everyone likes Clint, I reckon. What was your name, friend? Might be I'd reco'nize it."

"Pop. Pop—Walters. I—uh—I was thinkin' of ridin' out to the Double C Circle and askin' Clint up for a job. Think he could use a hand, do yuh?"

George looked embarrassed. He had the same gentle kindness that Pop remembered in George as a boy. Pop knew George figured Pop's range riding days were over, but hesitated to put it into words.

"Well, Walters, I don't know. Mebbe yes, and mebbe no. Depends on whether or not he's short-handed." He glanced up, smiling. "Figuring on riding right out there, were you?"

Pop nodded.

"Had your lunch yet? I was thinkin'—why don't you come down to my house and take potluck with Martha and me and the kids? We'd be right proud to have a Texas man at our table, and you could rest up a bit before your trip. It's quite a piece out to Clint's."

Pop beamed. It would be nice meeting Martha and the kids, he thought, gulping, even if he couldn't tell the youngsters that George's guest was really their sure-enough grandpappy.

"I'd be proud to accept that invitation," he said softly. "And I thankee kindly."

MARTHA was a sweet-faced, plump woman with a hint of gray streaking her coal black hair, friendly as apple pie. Pop munched her fine beef stew with appreciation, told himself that George could not have found a better woman, and covertly watched the two youngsters.

George, Jr., was a fine upright boy of nine, with direct gray eyes like those of his father. Gwen was the baby at seven, a pretty little thing with straw-colored hair and immense blue eyes. She kept looking at Pop and smiling, and Pop had trouble keeping his old eyes from misting and betraying his secret.

George walked out to the barn with him and gave him explicit directions to the Double C Circle.

"Good luck on that job you're chasing down, Pop," he said. "Clint'll likely take you on, seeing as you two knew each other in Texas. I'll see you again. Got to run now. I'm overdue down to the jail-house."

Pop turned on the swaybacked dun and frowned down at George.

"Don't you want me to give Clint any message, Marshal? Don't reckon you two see a great deal of each other, and you bein' brothers—"

George's brow formed three deep furrows. He debated his answer a moment.

"Yes," he said grimly. "Reckon I have got a message. Better not spring this on Clint though, till you've landed that job riding for him. Might put him in a mean sort of mood, and I reckon a cow gives more milk when she's peaceful-like."

Pop pulled the mare's head up, frowning. "What is your message for Clint, son?"

"You can tell Clint for me," said George, "he's to keep law-abidin', if he ain't lookin' for trouble. So long, Pop."

Six hours later Clint Childreth was looking Pop over with a keen blue eye.

"Dallas, hey?" he said. "I knew you in Dallas?"

"That's right," Pop lied uncomfortably. He had started this lie back in that saloon in Converse, and now he was forced to stay with it.

"My name's Pop Walters. We had a slew of Old Crows together one night, in the Brown House Bar. I was reppin' for old Charley Eagle, out at the Bar VJ and—" He suddenly smiled. "Don't reckon you'd remember at that, though. You was sort of full that night, as I remember."

Clint fondled his smooth chin. "And you want a job, you say, Pop? You're a mite old for ridin' herd on my short-horns, ain't you? Meaning no offense, understand. Thing is, I've been stole blind by a rustler gang, here lately, and most of my hands are picked for their lead-slingin' skill."

Pop sighed. "I'm gittin' along some." His eyes hardened. "Rustlers, hey? Any idee who they are?"

"None," gritted Clint Childreth. "But I figure we'll nail 'em. My men are all ridin' herd with guns on their hips and Winchesters slung on their saddles. We'll trap them devils, one of these dark nights and string 'em up!" His face twisted in a harsh grin. "Of course, my brother, George, has got real modern-minded, here lately. He don't like that."

Pop leaned forward. He realized he was about to learn the cause of the ill feeling between Clint and George now.

"How come?"

"Why—" Clint smiled crookedly "—he's managed to clean up Converse by layin' down a flat rule against gunplay. Stranger come into town a ways back, picked a fight with Charley Morse, and they squared off in a fair showdown gunfight. Nobody got hurt much. Charley caught a slug through his shoulder, was all. But what'd George do?"

"Tell me," said Pop.

"Slung the stranger in jail. Had old Judge Thomas send him down to Kitannining Prison for a year on an assault charge. And believe it or not, the whole town backed George up. That town's tamed down so my boys never go there no more for their blow-offs. Can't even shoot their guns at the moon, without gettin' throwed into George's calaboose, and as for fightin'—well, there just ain't any, in Converse."

"Is that bad?" Pop asked thoughtfully.

CLINT looked sour. "Mebbe not, from George's standpoint. It's a real feather in his cap as a town marshal, to keep things so quiet in Converse. But when he makes the mistake of tellin' me and my boys to hang up our guns, while rustlers are stealin' Double C cattle—well, there's a limit to any man's patience!"

Pop squirmed. It hurt, seeing his sons squared off against each other this way.

"George seemed like a right reasonable sort, what I saw of him, Clint. Must be more to it than that, ain't they?" He would not, Pop decided, convey George's message.

Clint scowled. "Well, George's idee is for me to run to the law every time I lose cattle, so he can whip up a posse and light out after the rustlers. That idea is loco. It's too blamed slow. Only way to fix rustlers is to strike back at 'em sudden and fast. I'm goin' to surprise 'em one of these nights, and brimstone's goin' to pop out here. And when it does, like as not, George will try to slap me in jail for takin' the law into my own hands. Huh! For tryin' to protect my own bread and butter!"

Pop brooded. As an old cowman from 'way back, he could certainly sympathize with Clint's side of the picture. George was kind of strict in his thinking, and Clint always had been sort of hot-headed. It was too bad.

He said placatingly, "Mind now, I ain't sidin' the marshal ag'in you, son, but I can see how this here set-up has put George over a barrel. Everything he's built up is apt to fall to pieces, if his brother won't stick to the rules as he makes 'em. If only you two didn't happen to be brothers, I don't reckon George'd make such a fuss."

"He'd better stay out of my way," cried Clint hotly. "That's all."

Pop wisely kept silent. Clint was a hot-headed young devil. Pop changed the subject. "About that job—it wouldn't have to be cowboy's work, son. I'm gittin' too old to ride range, and I know it. But I'm right handy with tools."

"I can use you, I guess," Clint nodded slowly. "We'll find something for you, around the ranchhouse."

Pop settled into the routine at the ranchhouse without any trouble. Clint's wife, a slender, blond woman, was pretty as sin, and pleasant to talk to, when the day's work was finished. She and Clint had no children, but they seemed mighty set on each other, Pop noticed. Aside from the recent trouble with rustlers, their life promised to be congenial and happy.

Pop was pleased as punch to see that Clint too, had found himself a good woman.

A month passed quickly, pleasantly. When the trouble broke, it came with the swiftness of lightning.

Pop was rudely awakened, at midnight, by Clint's raging voice in the bunkhouse.

"Out of them blankets, you sand-eyed sons. It's come time to earn the gun-slingin' wages you're drawin'!"

In a matter of minutes a dozen grim-jawed riders, armed to the teeth, were saddled and ready to ride. Pop strapped on his own hickory handled six-shooter and reined the swaybacked dun mare among them.

"Chuck Thomas," Clint announced grimly, "spotted the rustler gang movin' down the sides of Pace Valley toward that small herd of Herefords we got down there. They're creepin' up slow and cautious, accordin' to Chuck, so I figger this time we'll nail 'em right in the act of mak-

in' off with our cattle. Pop, what in blazes do yuh think you're doin'?"

"I'm comin' along," Pop said grimly.

Clint debated, then shrugged. "Your choice, I reckon. All right, men, let's fan it. And keep them guns handy."

They made a slow ride of it out to Pace Valley. For one thing, there was no moon, and their horses were overly cautious about putting their feet down. For another, Clint was set on surprising the rustlers.

They finally tethered their mounts on a scrubby ridge overlooking the herd in the little valley.

GINGERLY Clint crept forward. He squinted over the ridge for perhaps ten long minutes, and finally crawled back to the shivering party of man hunters.

"I've seen 'em," he whispered. "Three-four men, is all. They're down there in back of a couple of boulders, not three hundred yards from where we're layin'. Reckon they're waitin' for our night riders to git good an' sleepy." He laughed shortly. "We'll sneak up on 'em, and give 'em a real surprise party."

"Who do yuh reckon it is, boss?" asked "Dutch" Kroner.

"Can't say," whispered Clint grimly. "We'll know soon enough now, I reckon."

In line with Clint's plan, the men crawled down the slope, slithering snake-like from brush patch to boulder.

It took them the better part of an hour to get as close as Clint wanted. They were less than fifty yards from the skulking party of rustlers when Clint suddenly reared up straight in the darkness.

"All right, you thievin' coyotes," he thundered. "And don't say you was shot without any warnin'. Plug 'em, boys!"

Clint's own gun was out, erupting flame and hot lead down toward the hidden party of men below him. Pop held his own six up, took careful aim at one shadowy figure down there below, and then held that pose, sweating a bit, unable to release the hammer.

He shook his white head, cursing himself, wondering what in sin was the matter with him. He'd never been gun-shy before this. He had always taken a range rider's natural pleasure in pot-shooting rustlers.

The rest of Clint's men opened up less than a second after Clint boomed his challence. A fusillade swept the party below, and then an enraged voice bellowed:

"Clint, yuh dad-blamed fool! *Hold* that fire!"

Clint stood like a statue, struck numb by that bellowing voice. He lifted one hand, and the blasting gunfire abruptly ceased.

"What in blue blazes is goin' on here?" gulped Clint. "That you, George?"

George Childreth came up the slight incline toward his younger brother, walking with long, swift strides. His shadowy bulk suggested the enormity of his wrath, Pop thought, squinting sickly at the pair through the darkness.

"You fool," George thundered. "You shot Sam Langdorf. Best deputy I ever had. Why in tarnation can't you put a curb bit on that fool temper?"

Clint was stunned. "I—I—"

"We were all set to catch them rustlers red-handed," George growled bitterly. "Had a hunch they'd be strikin' tonight, and I'd've nailed 'em, for certain, but you and your gun-proddy range jockeys come hornin' in. By gosh, Clint, I'm through foolin' with you. I warned you I wasn't goin' to stand for any more of your gun-handy nonsense."

"Now, you listen," Clint's voice slurred in the darkness, "I've took all the abuse I'm goin' to from you, George. You bein' my brother don't excuse it."

"Clint," cut in George's voice coldly. "As far as what's just happened is concerned, we ain't brothers. I'm the Law, and where my duty's concerned, I don't make any exceptions. From where I was standin', it looked like it was you cut Sam Langdorf down. Sam has a wife and four kids, and by thunder, if he don't pull through, I'll be bringin' you in, Clint."

"It was a mistake," Clint said shakily. "I never knowed that was you and your deputies."

"It was a mistake," said George. "It wouldn't of happened, if you'd listened to me, and let the Law handle this problem, instead of hirin' a bunch of gun-throwin' riders. Mebbe you won't go to jail for this, Clint—I don't reckon any jury'd hold what's happened ag'in you—but get this straight, if Sam dies, you'll stand legal trial. I'll be out for you, Clint, and you'd

better shuck off your gun and come peaceable."

George turned bitterly down toward where Sam Langdorf lay, moaning. Clint walked up the slope, growling under his breath. "All right," he said shortly. "Let's make tracks for the ranchhouse."

POP put in a ragged morning around the ranchhouse. Right after breakfast, Clint had dispatched a rider to town.

"Find out how Sam Langdorf's doin'," he said. "If he cashes his chips, go to the florist shop and git a big bunch of flowers for his woman. Tell her for me I'd as soon of shot my right arm off, as kill Sam, and I'll be in to pay my own respects later."

"All right," nodded the rider, squirming at the prospect of the job on his hands.

"Git back here fast, if Sam don't pull through," said Clint. "I got a hunch George wasn't foolin'. He would try to haul me in, but I'll be a two-headed rooster if he's big enough to do it."

"No sense pilin' trouble on trouble, is there, son" Pop cut in apologetically. " 'T wouldn't hurt nothin' if you was to go in and face charges. Like George said himself, there ain't a chance in China of you bein' convicted. What happened was an accident, plain and simple."

"What happens to George, if he comes out here lookin' for me," snarled the hot-tempered Clint, "will be another accident, Pop. I took all the shovin' around from George that I'm agoin' to."

Clint's rider came back right after lunch. He was not alone. Pop squinted hard at the enlarging dust cloud, and groaned, recognizing the tall man who rode alongside of Clint's messenger.

It was George. That, thought Pop sadly, could mean only one thing. Sam Langdorf hadn't made it. George was coming to take Clint in!

Clint stood on the gallery of the big ranchhouse, shading his eyes as he watched the pair turn in the long lane. Abruptly, he swung into the house, then reappeared a moment later, strapping a heavy gunbelt around his slender hips. His wife tried to stop him, to hold him inside the house, but Clint's face was red. He pushed her gently aside.

"Better git back in your kitchen," he said. "I wouldn't want you to see this."

He walked down toward the hitchrack at the base of the big cottonwood tree, his hands hooked idly in his gunbelt. Pop followed sickly, wondering what in tarnation he could do to stop this. Clint's eyes were narrow slits in his handsome face. A muscle down low in his cheek kept twitching with anger. He was all worked up, and words, Pop knew, would have no effect on him.

He swung on Pop shortly. "Git back out of the way, Pop. This ain't none of your affair an' you know it."

Pop watched George ride up and slip heavily from the saddle, dropping his reins over the hitch-rack. George's face looked very sober, very determined.

Pop was suddenly seeing George's sweet-smiling wife, Martha, and the two kids, George, Jr. and the straw-haired little Gwen. His own grandchildren, and here he stood, helpless, while chances were they might lose their daddy.

"Give up to him, son," he growled to Clint. "For the sake of—"

"Git your old carcass back out of here, Pop. This here's my private trouble." Clint faced George over ten yards of lawn. "Well, George?"

George stood flat on his feet, his face strained. He shrugged his meaty shoulders. "Sam died, Clint," he said soberly. "I'm takin' you in."

Clint's unpredictable temper flared, hard as he tried to control it.

"I think different."

Pop saw George's eyes narrow, but the big fellow was trying his best to be reasonable and patient with Clint.

"I know," he said slowly. "I know what you're thinkin', Clint. You're thinkin' I'm actin' mighty stubborn and hard-shell. I s'pose another man in my place'd just say forget what happened to Sam. But that ain't my way, Clint. I'm sorry—and I'm takin' you in!"

Clint looked sullen. "Might take some doin'."

"It might, but I got my duty, though." George sighed. "What good's a lawman if he don't carry out his duty."

"You ain't takin' me," Clint said. He shifted his weight slowly, turning his side toward George, a gunman's position. His hooked thumbs bit deeper under his cartridge belt, and his mouth thinned to a hard line. "I ain't done nothing wrong, way I see it. You and me always got

along all right, George, till you put that badge on and begun to git so tarnation high-handed. I reckon we been comin' to this right along. That badge you're totin' don't scare me, and I ain't bluffin' down."

GEORGE stood on his heavy legs, debating briefly.

"I'm warnin' you, Clint."

"You can save it," Clint snapped, his eyes flashing with impatience. "If you come here dealin' showdown, I'll see your cards. I've heard enough palaver!"

"Clint—Clint!" George was trying to hold himself in line, but it was torture, Pop saw.

"I'm goin' to count to three," Clint said. "When I'm done countin', you're either goin' to hop on that horse and fan the breeze off my land, George, or I'm goin' to throw lead. I ain't foolin'."

Pop pulled in a rasping breath, watching the pair through filmy eyes. They'd kill each other.

"One!" Clint rasped.

George stood his ground, his gray eyes looking baffled. He had not reached for his guns.

"Two!" Clint said. George still hadn't moved even a fraction. It got Clint sore. "I ain't foolin, you big bull-headed lummox. This is it."

"Clint!" Pop yelled hoarsely. But it was no good. Clint was furious, his rage climbing higher and higher within him.

"Three!" he snapped out viciously, and his right hand darted swiftly toward his heavy six-shooter.

George still hadn't moved a muscle, but Pop could read the glinting rage and frustration in Clint's eyes now. The boy was momentarily out of his head, both angry and frightened. He'd cut George down like a stalk of wheat, Pop thought weirdly, and once again he was seeing George's wife, Martha, and those two cute kids.

Pop didn't have his own gun on, but he moved on Clint like a panther. One lunging, desperate step closed the short gap between them.

Pop grabbed Clint's gun arm, and clung stubbornly to it. Clint backed away, punching at Pop's face with his free hand.

"You meddlin' old fool!" For the instant, his hot rage was transferred to Pop. He struck Pop's face, his chest, still trying to wrest the gun free.

There was a smacking explosion close to Pop's face. He felt flame searing along his chest, raking his ribs. The heavy slug smashed down through his side, hurling him limply groundward. He hit with a solid thump, and a curtain moved slowly over the bright western sky. . . .

Later, he awoke between cool, clean sheets. There was a faint breeze fanning his feverish cheeks. His side ached like misery with every thump of his heart. He opened his eyes and saw Clint and George standing worriedly at the foot of the bed. Clint's pretty blond wife came in with a damp cloth, which she pressed to Pop's forehead.

"Howdy, boys," Pop breathed weakly.

They both grinned at him like a pair of monkeys. Clint appeared to be abashed.

"You got to get better, Pop," he said. "I felt like bashin' my head in, when I saw what I'd done to you. That fool temper of mine went loco."

"I'll get better," Pop said. "Better go in with George, now, and make things up with him."

Clint smiled. "We'd already decided on doin' that, Pop. We been doin' some thinkin' out loud, the last couple hours, waitin' for you to come to. We're both kind of hard-headed, is what we've decided. You been delirious, Pop. You've done a whole heap of talkin'. What you said's instructed us some."

"So?" sighed Pop. "And what did I say?"

"You said," smiled Clint gently, "if we didn't cut scrappin' and start actin' our ages, you'd git the cat-of-nine-tails out of the barn and give our britches a fannin'."

Pop closed his eyes.

"Ain't that a strange way for an old buck like me to be talkin'?"

"Come off it, Dad," said George, his voice thick with emotion. "You're home now, and the masquerade's over."

Home. Pop smiled. The word made a warm place in his mind as his cracked lips silently phrased it. Home, to live out his final days in peace and contentment.

But he would never let Clint and George know how he had faked those delirious ravings and revealed his true identity to them. On the surface, at least, he had not come begging. After all, even a worn-out old range drifter like Pop had his pride to think of.

Shoo-fly takes another try at Bull with the shovel

FUNNY GUNS

By L. P. HOLMES

Puggy, Ike and Shoo-fly are allergic to work, but cleaning out these city slickers just isn't work—it's a pleasure!

DOWN through the years the wise men have said a lot of things that are true enough, such as, "Debt is a curse." I and "Puggy" Jimpson are beginning to realize that—plenty! On the other hand, the so-called wise jigger that said, "Fat men never get mad", sure was draggin' his rope. Because Willie Weehaw, who runs the general store in Cactus City, is fat, and he's mad. At I and Puggy.

It's like this. I and Puggy run out of eatin' tobacco and we're in bracing Willie Weehaw for a little credit. When we mention the word, Willie begins to swell up and get red as a ripe tomater. Then he cuts loose, bellering like a bull with the heel fly. He waves a bill in our faces.

"Credit!" screeches Willie. "You two

moochers think the moon is made of green cheese and that I can make a livin' out of sunshine and fresh air? Take a look at this bill. Forty-two dollars and ninety-three cents, which yuh owe me already! And it's been owin' since nigh onto a year and a half. Now yuh've got the eternal, brassbound gall to come in here and try and wangle four-bits worth of eatin' tobacco on tick. You—you—!"

"Now, now, Willie," soothes Puggy. "No need of yuh bustin' a gallus over a little thing like this. Yuh wouldn't be meanin' that yuh don't value Ike's and my trade, would you? Our business—"

"Ain't worth a plugged nickel!" whoops Willie. "Yuh don't ever show in my store except when yuh're flat busted. Long as yuh got a thin dime in yore jeans yuh hang around the Oasis, lappin' up red likker. Any time yuh show in here, yuh're moochin'. And I'm sick of it, plumb! Startin' right now, things is goin' to be different."

Right then was when "Bosco" Bates shoved his head in the door and demands to know what all the hollerin' is about. Right at the top of his lungs, Willie tells him. He tells the whole town, if it's halfway listenin'.

Bosco comes on in and growls, "Lemme see that bill, Willie."

I and Puggy start edgin' toward the door, but stop pronto when Bosco shoves one of them mean looks of his at us. Bosco Bates is the sheriff of Cactus County, plenty big and plenty tough. Several times I and Puggy have tangled with Bosco and, one way or another, we always come out second best. It don't pay to get frisky with Bosco Bates, which I and Puggy have found out. So we don't.

BOSCO looks over that durned bill and tells Willie he'll see that it gets paid.

"Then somebody else will have to pay it besides them two lazy, booze-lappin', moochin' sons." Willie snorts. "They never had that much money in all their worthless lives and they never stuck to a job long enough to earn that much."

"They will to this one," promised Bosco. "They'll work and they'll earn it and they'll pay it. Every red cent."

The way Bosco said that, I get a little weak in the knees.

"Looky here, Bosco," Puggy says, fretful-like. "When yuh start talkin' about work, yuh want to remember that Ike and me ain't too stout in some ways. Fact is, there's times when we're real delicate. Besides, we ain't cut out for all kinds of work. We're specialists at—"

"Bummin' your way through life," cuts in Bosco, hard-like. "And I ain't standin' for it."

"This here work, Bosco," says I, real humble. "What kind and where at?"

"Cuttin' tan-bark," says Bosco. "Up in War Hatchet Gorge. Tye Carter, he was in to see me, sayin' he had a new contract for tan-bark and he needed a couple of extra cutters to work that big tan oak thicket at the head of War Hatchet. Tye, he's down at the blacksmith shop gettin' a wagon fixed up for the job, so you two and me, we're takin' a little walk down there and talkin' things over with Tye, now."

"But that old road up War Hatchet," yelps Puggy. "It's all growed over and washed out. We can't ever get no wagon over it."

"Yuh can if yuh grub it out and fix it as yuh go along," growls Bosco. "Give 'em their eatin' tobacco, Willie. They'll pay for it, this trip."

I can't help groanin'. When Bosco Bates gets a certain look in his eye, he means business. He's got that look, now. . . .

The way out to War Hatchet Gorge leads by "Shoo-fly" Davis' place, over in Yucca Basin. Shoo-fly is a skinny little runt, with more hair'n whiskers than a musk ox. And most always he's got a jug of pretty fair snake juice around the premises.

"If," says Puggy, thoughtful-like, "we can talk Shoo-fly into comin' along, and if he's got a jug of likker, that'd help out, a lot."

Which makes plenty of sense to me. And, seeing that I'm driving the wagon, I rein right over toward Shoo-fly's shanty. But Shoo-fly ain't got any jug. All he's got is a fit of the blues.

"That Tug Stevens and his Oasis Bar," glooms Shoo-fly. "After all the hard money I've spent in there, now, when I'm a little shy of money, Tug wouldn't give me a jug of likker on tick. When I only owe him for nine jugs, now. I ask yuh, Ike—you and Puggy—what's a little thing like nine jugs of likker?"

"Heaven if yuh got 'em, misery if yuh

ain't," grunts Puggy, all let down.

Me, I'm let down, too, kind of countin' on that jug ever since Puggy mentions it. But I'm also remembering that Shoo-fly is a tough, wiry little ant, who can do a man's day of work, any time he's a-mind to. And I'm thinking that if we have Shoo-fly along with us to help cut tan-bark, it'd make the whole thing some easier on I and Puggy.

"Only way yuh'll ever get a jug again is to work for it, Shoo-fly," says I. "Like I and Puggy are goin' to do for our eatin' tobacco and other fixin's. Willie Weehaw shut down on us just like Tug Stevens shut down on you. Better come on along with us and cut tan-bark."

"I can cut tan-bark or I can leave it lay," says Shoo-fly. "Right now I'm lettin' it lay."

"That's just the way Ike and me felt about it." Puggy nudges me. "But Bosco Bates, he felt different. Bosco says it's high time all folks in these parts got out of debt. Them who don't, Bosco aims to throw into that gol-durned, hard-bunked, starvation jailhouse of his."

Shoo-fly wiggled, nervous-like. "Did Bosco say that?"

"He shore was leadin' right up to it." I nods. "Else why do yuh think I and Puggy are linin' out for that tan oak thicket at the head of War Hatchet?"

"I'm gettin' the feelin' that mebbe I'd enjoy a spell of tan-bark cuttin'," opines Shoo-fly. "I really am."

"Get yore blankets and hop aboard," says I.

Puggy shore called the turn on that road up War Hatchet Gorge. Some places the brush had plumb growed over it. Other places it was all washed out to tarnation and gone. It takes I and Puggy and Shoo-fly two days of steady brush grubbin' and fillin' in of washouts before we can get the wagon over it.

WHEN the sweat starts rollin' good on Shoo-fly it affects him just like cold water affects a cat. Makes him plumb peevish.

"I come out here with you two jug-heads to cut tan-bark," he snarls. "Not to put a hump in my back grubbin' brush and swingin' a pick and shovel. I ain't a mean-minded man, but right about now I'm half-way wishin' that Bosco Bates was in blazes with his throat cut."

"Well, he ain't, and it ain't," says Puggy. "Bosco Bates is right here in Cactus County, big and tough and mean as a grizzly bear. Which it don't pay to forget, not for one little second."

Tough as it is to get to the head of War Hatchet, once you get there, it's plumb nice. For it opens out all of a sudden into a big sort of basin, with nigh onto straight up and down country all around. There's a wide, green flat with a little crick runnin' through, all shaded with alders and willow. If somebody could have brought us in a jug of likker regular, I and Puggy and Shoo-fly would have been content to put in the whole summer, right there.

But there ain't no jug and there's a sight of tan-bark to be cut, so, after restin' up a couple of days from choppin' our way over that durned road, I and Puggy and Shoo-fly get to work at what brought us there.

That tan oak thicket takes in just about the steepest side hill of the whole layout, which makes it plenty tough to work. But Shoo-fly, he can climb like a ring-tailed baboon, which helps a lot. And, after we open up a chute for it, the tan bark goes skiddin' plumb down to the flat. Every evenin' we knock off cuttin' early enough to stack that day's gather. It's three days later while we're doin' this that Shoo-fly cocks his head and says:

"Listen! Broncs comin'."

Our first thought is that it's probably Bosco Bates and Tye Carter ridin' in to see if we're earnin' our salt. But right away we find out different. For out into the meadow comes a whole passel of folks, along with a flock of loaded pack-horses.

"Goshamighty!" grunts Puggy. "What is this, a Sunday school picnic?"

"Naw!" Shoo-fly spits. "Where are yore eyes? That's the Tepee outfit with a flock of dudes. I can see Slim Dykes and Lee Hanford and Millie Kyle."

So could I, by this time, and I can see that Shoo-fly has called the turn. Two years before, "Buck" Kyle had started entertainin' dudes as a kind of side-line business to raisin' cows. I'd heard it said there was more money in dudes than there was in cows, the market price holdin' steadier. And Buck Kyle, he never was one to miss dabbin' his loop on any

stray dollar rollin' around.

Anyhow, Buck fixed up the Tepee ranchhouse real fancy to take care of dudes, and part of the entertainin' was to take the dudes on a real, honest to grandma Western campin' trip. This shapes up as one of them things.

The whole shivaree pulls in alongside the crick and we can see Lee Hanford and "Slim" Dykes begin strippin' off packs and unsaddlin'. It's plain they mean to make a camp right there.

"Let's go over and say hello," suggests Shoo-fly. "Mebbe they'll invite us to supper. Which I shore could stand. I'm so sick of breakin' my jaw on them cobblestones that Puggy calls biscuits, I could cry like a baby."

Right away Puggy, who's been doin' the cookin' for us three, begins to wrath up.

"Why, yuh durned old vulture! At every sittin' yuh eat more than Ike and me do in a week. Yuh keep me all wore out just cookin' enough grub to fill yuh up. And now yuh talk about my good biscuits!"

But Shoo-fly ain't listenin'. He's makin' a bee-line for the new camp, so I and Puggy follow along.

"It ain't grub he's hopin' to run down," growls Puggy. "It's a jug."

"Then he's plumb out of luck," I says. "Jugs don't go along on deals like this one."

Lee Hanford and Slim Dykes greet us reasonable friendly, though Lee, he's sort of gloomy-lookin'. They ask us what we're doin' in War Hatchet and while we're tellin' 'em, here comes Millie Kyle along with three of them dudes close on her heels.

Millie is a pretty little piece, with lots of black hair and black eyes with plenty of snap in 'em.

"Hello, boys," she says, pleasant enough. "What brings you here?"

"Cuttin' tan-bark, Miss Millie," I answers, plumb polite. "We been here nigh a week now."

"Just the three of you?"

"Just I and Puggy and Shoo-fly."

Millie turns to one of these dudes.

"I thought we'd have War Hatchet all to ourselves, Mr. Graff. But I'm sure Ike and Puggy and Shoo-fly won't bother us. They've got a tan-bark camp over yonder."

THIS Graff jigger ain't very big, but he's weasel sleek. He's got yaller hair and pale blue eyes that are colder than a snow peak in the middle of a blizzard. He's got a little yaller mustache, too, and he's plumb good-lookin' if you can forget his eyes. He looks I and Puggy and Shoo-fly up and down like he's gazin' at somethin' lyin' in the street. Then he nods.

"I understand, Miss Kyle," he says. "I'm sure they won't bother us."

He's got a funny voice. It don't raise, it don't lower. It just sort of drones, like a cold wind cuttin' past a cabin corner. He's dressed plumb elegant, with a tan silk shirt, fancy choke-bore ridin' britches and high, slickery boots so shiny a feller could see himself in 'em to shave by.

The other two jiggers with him are dressed likewise, but they don't wear them fancy clothes as well as Graff does. One of 'em is a skinny, dried-up little shrimp, with a bony face as dark and tough-lookin' as an Apache. The other is built like a Hereford bull, kind of dumb lookin', with little bitty eyes set way back in his head. But his ears is the funniest lookin' dang pair of ears I ever see on a human. They look like chunks of underdone flap-jacks, plastered agin his skull. This jigger's got a high, squeaky voice.

"Say the word, Boss," he says now, "and me and Skive will put the hot-foot to these three twirps."

Graff, he don't even look at this feller. He just says, "Shut up, Bull." And "Bull" shuts up.

Millie Kyle speaks up, quick-like. "Mr. Graff and his party have come out here for a complete rest and don't want to be bothered with any visitors. I hope you understand, boys."

Shoo-fly, havin' a temper that catches fire plumb easy, is beginning to git his roach up at what this Bull feller had said. But now he bows, kind of stiff, to Millie.

"Yeah, we understand, Miss Millie," he says. And off he marches, high-chinned as all get-out, with I and Puggy trailin' along. . . .

Shoo-fly is squattin' by our campfire, doin' pretty good for hisself on some of them biscuits of Puggy's that he'd throwed one of these here aspersions against. Between bites he's sputterin' like a wet lantern.

"Yuh heard what that big toad calls us,

didn't yuh? Twirps! I been cussed out plenty in my time, but I never was called that before. And I don't like it."

"Yeah," growls Puggy. "He says him and that Skive jigger is goin' to put the hot-foot to us. Now what in thunderation do yuh figger he meant by that?"

"Probably a durned good kick in the pants," says I.

"Let 'em try it!" yelps Shoo-fly. "Just let 'em! Mebbe that Bull jasper is three times big as me, but I'll cut him down to my size with a pick handle so fast he'll shore think a swarm of bob-cats has took over."

Shoo-fly ain't braggin'. I'll say that for Shoo-fly. When he gets his neck bowed he'll tackle anything that walks, crawls or flies, regardless of size, shape or anythin' else.

"And that Injun-faced Skive jigger," growls Puggy. "I'll pinch his skinny neck until his eyes stick out like a squashed bull-frog's."

"Me," says I, bein' the most long-headed of the three of us, "I'm withholdin' judgment for a while. We leave them alone, they oughter leave us alone. So we'll just go on cuttin' tan-bark and mindin' our own business."

Them three jiggers, Graff and Skive and Bull, ain't the only dudes in the crowd. There's a couple of womenfolks, too, and one of 'em has got a high, brassy sort of laugh that fair sets a man's teeth on edge. It comes echoin' across the meadow now and Shoo-fly squirms looking like he smells polecat.

"Had I a female woman around me with a laugh like that," he grits, "I'd shore gag her with a gunny-sack. Now take Miss Millie. When she laughs a man sort of holds his breath to listen. Because he's listenin' to music, like meadow larks a-singin' on a sunshiny mornin' after a frosty night."

"You said it!" approved Puggy. "But that other'n, she sounds like a hooty-corn with its tail in a crack. Hope she chokes, or somethin', else we'll get no sleep all night long."

We turns in a little early and bye'n bye things quiet down over at the other camp. I'm just about to drift off when somebody calls out, soft-like:

"Hey, Ike—Puggy—Shoo-fly! Yuh still awake?"

IT'S Slim Dykes. He comes creepin' in and asks, desperate-like:

"Where is it?"

"Where's what?" mumbles Shoo-fly.

"Yore jug. I need a shot of corn likker like a desert needs rain. And I never see you three junipers anywheres together that yuh ain't got a jug. Trot it out and save my life."

"We ain't got a jug, Slim," I tells him. "That's gospel. Tug Stevens was too durned mean to give Shoo-fly a jug on tick."

"A man that mean ought to be hung," moans Slim, so disappointed he is half-whimperin'. "Likker would be medicine to me right now. Settle my nerves after bein' around that camp."

"Hope that woman with the squawky laugh is bedded down for the night," said Puggy.

"Ain't she a caution though!" groans Slim. "Sounds like a locoed burro brayin' in a rainstorm."

"Just what kind of a thingamajig setup yuh tied in with anyhow, Slim?" asks Shoo-fly. "What breed of lobos are them three men galoots, anyhow?"

"They're fiddlers, on a vacation," Slim explains.

"Fiddlers! Yuh mean—fiddlers?"

"That's whatever. Each one of them has got a fiddle in a case, and the way they keep close to them fiddles all the time yuh'd think the durn things were made of gold."

"Ain't they done no fiddlin' yet?" I asks.

"Not yet," says Slim. "Ain't nary one of 'em opened a case yet. When they do I'm shore hopin' to be around and get a good look at a fiddle that's as val'able as these 'uns must be."

"I heard tell of fiddles costin' as high as a hundred dollars," says Puggy.

"A hundred dollars!" snorts Shoo-fly, rarin' up in his blankets. "Yuh're loco. That fiddle of Crazy Pike's cost him three dollars and a mangy coyote hide. Got it off a medicine peddler that went busted and was stranded. Ain't no better fiddle than that. Crazy gets real music out of it."

"How come Buck Kyle ain't along?" I asks Slim.

"Bronc kicked him and laid him up for a spell. So Miss Millie took the party out. Me and Lee are along to wrangle broncs

and pack and do other chores. Lee drawed the cookin' job and should he get half a chance I bet he puts a shot of rat poison in that Graff jigger's coffee."

"How come?" asks Shoo-fly.

"Why Miss Millie and Graff, they seem to hit it off real friendly. And you know Lee Hanford has been sweet on Miss Millie for a long time."

"If'n Miss Millie's got half the sense of a wood tick she'll dab her loop on Lee and let that Graff jigger go choke," says Shoo-fly. "Lee, he's a right nice gent. But Graff, he makes me think of a rattlesnake, lookin' you over, figgerin' a good spot to grab holt. And he was real disappointed because he ain't got War Hatchet Gorge all to his ownself. Who in Tophet he think he is—King of Siam?"

Shoo-fly lets out a mutter of cusses and pulls a blanket over his head.

Slim, seein' we got no jug, slides off back to the other camp, plumb disconsolate. The rest of us go to sleep.

Things go along pretty well for three or four days. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly mind our own durn business, cuttin' tan-bark, skiddin' it down to the meadow and stackin' it. We leaves that other camp so durned well alone, they just can't stand it. So who should come driftin' over one evenin' but Bull and Skive and them two womenfolks.

One of the women is plenty swarthy, just like Skive. The other'n, hangin' on to Bull's arm, she's plenty buxom and she's got a mop of hair that ain't red and it ain't yaller. It's a sort of flea-bit roan in-between shade. She's the one with that squawky laugh. She cuts it loose a couple of times and Shoo-fly, he gets that same look in his eye that a bronc does when it's all set to start gnawin' its halter rope. Her and the swarthy one looks I and Puggy and Shoo-fly over like we was somethin' in a zoo.

"Quaint, aren't they?" says Roany.

Bull, he leers. "Twirps, that's all. Me and Skive would sure enjoy givin' them the hot-foot."

Shoo-fly makes a funny sound in his throat and starts walkin' in a crooked circle, leadin' to a ax. No tellin' what might have happened then and there if Graff and Miss Millie hadn't come spurrin' up about then. They'd been off on a ride and were just gettin' back.

MISS MILLIE, she's got a plenty haughty, high-chinned look about her, her face kind of pale and her eyes full of sparks. Graff, he's dead white, except for a red welt across his face that couldn't have been made by anythin' but the lash of Miss Millie's quirt.

There's cold rage in his eyes, and his voice is rocks grittin' together when he says to Bull and the others:

"Get back to camp. Stay there!"

If ary man had used that tone on me I'd have told him to go to thunder in a hangin' basket. But Bull and Skive and them womenfolks, they don't answer back one little word. They just slink out of there like whipped sheep. And Roany ain't squawkin' that high, nerve-spoilin' laugh of hers—not one little squawk, she ain't.

"Was a man to use that tone on me," says Puggy, slow-like, "I'd cut his throat from ear to ear. But them four, they just crept off like wounded coyotes. Did yuh ever see female women painted up like that before, Ike? They're no good, them women ain't—no good, I tell yuh. What do you think, Shoo-fly?"

Shoo-fly ain't even listenin'. Shoo-fly is over kneelin' on the ground, poundin' it with both fists.

"Twirps, hot-foot, quaint," he's whimperin' over and over. "Twirps, hot-foot, quaint—ar-r-rgh!"

I ain't sayin' a thing. I'm thinkin'—plenty! I'm thinkin' that all of a sudden the soft blue sundown shadows in War Hatchet Gorge have turned cold and somehow full of threat. I'm wishin' I had kept my old .45 six-gun instead of tradin' it in with Tug Stevens for drinkin' likker.

I reckon some of the same feeling must have got hold of Puggy and Shoo-fly for, once they quiet down, they are plenty quiet. All in all, everything is too durn quiet to suit me, because it ain't the kind of quiet that does a man a lick of good. It's the kind that keeps a man all pulled tight inside, waitin' for somethin' to break, somethin' you can't figger out or put a name to. Like bein' up on a mean bronc that's got its ears flattened back and its eyes a-rollin' white and, while it ain't movin' just at that second, you know darn well it's shortly goin' to come unhinged and do its durndest best to chuck yuh into the middle of the next county.

Right after supper, Shoo-fly turns in, still mumblin' about twirps and hot-foot. I help Puggy swipe up the dishes, then we hunker down, smokin' and watchin' the fire turn to coals and the coals turn gray and begin to fade.

Bye'n bye Puggy says, quiet-like:

"You got the same feelin' I got, Ike? Kinda like there was a keg of powder somewheres around with the fuse burnin' shorter all the time?"

I nods. "That names it good as any, Puggy. Yuh see that welt on that Graff jigger's face?"

"I see it," says Puggy. "That means he got fresh with Miss Millie and she really laid her quirt on him. And unless I'm crazier than I think I am, he ain't the sort to forget, or not try and get even. Wish I had a gun."

"Been wishin' the same thing," says I. "Wish I hadn't traded in my old forty-five to Tug Stevens for likker."

Right about then we hear somebody comin' in, quiet-like. This time it's Lee Hanford. Lee's a good boy, kind of long and lean and clean-lookin', good on the eye, hard-workin' and steady. By his manner, he's plumb worried. He hunkers in by I and Puggy.

"How's for borrowin' a gun, boys?" he says. "Ike, you got a old Peacemaker Colt forty-five. Loan it to me, will yuh?"

"Would if I still had it, Lee," I says. Then I tells what I done with it.

"Ain't you and Slim Dykes packin' yore guns this trip, Lee?" asked Puggy.

"Nope. Millie, she told Slim and me to leave 'em home. This Graff polecat tells her he don't want no guns around. Said it would make the womenfolks nervous to see Slim and me packin' hardware. So we took 'em off and left 'em in the home ranch bunkhouse. And have I been kickin' myself ever since!"

Shoo-fly, bein' curious as a jay bird, crawls out of his blankets and comes on over. He's heard every word.

"What yuh figger yuh need a gun for now, Lee?" Shoo-fly asks. "Don't need guns to herd a flock of fiddle-playin' dudes, do yuh?"

"Them ain't fiddles in them cases," says Lee, pretty grim-like. "Them's guns."

"Guns!"

"Yep, guns. Funny guns, darndest lookin' weapons I ever lay eye on. Today, when Millie is out ridin' with that Graff hombre, and them other four come over here to pester you boys, I took a chance and looked into one of them fiddle cases. Had a funny feelin' about 'em, right from the first. And what do I find in this fiddle case? I find this gun. And was it a queer-lookin' rig! But deadly somehow, deadly as sin."

I and Puggy and Shoo-fly are plenty wide awake now, and interested.

"What did this here funny gun look like, Lee?" Puggy asks.

LEE describes it, best he can.

"That," chirps Shoo-fly, plumb important-like, "is a Johnny gun."

"A Johnny gun!" snorts Puggy. "Looky here, Shoo-fly, this ain't no jokin' matter. This is plumb serious. Whoever heard of such a thing as a Johnny gun?"

"I have," raps Shoo-fly. "Them's the kind of guns these here big city gangsters use when they get the notion to mow down a few folks. Them Johnny guns spit lead faster'n a watermelon-eatin' peon can spit seeds. I tell yuh I know what I'm talkin' about."

"Then," says Puggy, "them junipers ain't fiddle players out on a vacation. They're some of these here big city gangsters."

"And," adds I, thinkin' hard, "that bein' the case, they must have come to War Hatchet to hide out. Which answers the question as to why this Graff jigger seemed more irritated at I and Puggy and Shoo-fly bein' here cuttin' tan-bark."

"That," says Lee, "adds right up with everythin' else. In case you boys didn't know it, Millie had to quirt that Graff polecat this afternoon to make him mind his manners. And tonight at supper she announces that tomorrow mornin' we pack up and start back for the ranch. But Graff, plenty nasty-like, says no go. He says we stay right here in War Hatchet until he says otherwise. Now yuh know why I wanted to borrow a gun."

It's right close to midnight when I and Puggy and Shoo-fly finally get talked out. Lee, he's long since gone back to the other camp. Late as it is when I pull the blankets over my head, I still don't get to sleep right away. But finally I do and when I wake up, it's daylight and somebody is rootin' me with a boot toe. I look up and

see this Graff jigger standin' over me. And durn me if he ain't got one of these Johnny guns in his hands!

"Get up!" he snarls, backin' away a couple of steps and swingin' the muzzle of that danged funny gun around real careless. "Hurry up!"

I don't argue, not with that gun lookin' me in the eye. I crawls out of my blankets and into my boots. Graff, he rousts out Puggy and Shoo-fly the same way. Puggy, he moves pretty spry, but Shoo-fly, he sort of takes his time. Which makes this Graff jigger a little peeved, I reckon. Anyhow, he swings this Johnny gun sort of close to Shoo-fly's line and lets her go a second.

Holy cow! That gun lets out a roar and a whoop that stands my hair plumb on end. A line of empty ca'tridges curves out one side of it in a brass stream. Behind Shoo-fly and a little to one side there's a three-inch-thick alder saplin'. That saplin', cut right off clean a foot from the ground, topples over and falls. Did that gun throw lead!

"You see?" sneers Graff. "Get a move on!"

No argument. We shore do. Graff lines us up and marches us over to the other camp, where that Bull juniper squats with another of them Johnny guns in his paws, coverin' Miss Millie, Lee Hanford and Slim Dykes. At sight of us, marchin' up meek and mild, Bull grins.

"Want I should burn 'em down, Boss?" he asks. "These twirps ain't no good in the world."

"Not now," snaps Graff. "Maybe later. Keep an eye on 'em while me and Skive figger out a few moves."

Roany and that other dame ain't in sight, but pretty soon, over in one of the tents I hear a tin-pan giggle so I know where them two is located. Graff and Skive, they move off to one side a little and begin mutterin' talk back and forth. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we gather up with Miss Millie and Lee Hanford and Slim Dykes and sort of start waitin' this thing out.

Bull, he keeps leerin' at us, them little, deep-sunk eyes of his showin' nothin' but a hunger to start killin'. Rememberin' the way that alder sapling was cut down, I ain't feelin' a bit good inside, not a bit.

There sure is a mean streak in Bull. He starts naggin' at Shoo-fly, askin' him when he last had a haircut and a shave. Shoo-fly, hatin' Bull a-plenty already, and bein' sort of sensitive about his hair and whiskers, is beginnin' to get his neck bowed, which I can see, plain. And which worries me a big plenty. For, like I already said, when Shoo-fly gets his neck bowed real proper, there just ain't no real tellin' what he's liable to do. Shoo-fly don't say nothin', he just sort of snarls soundless back at Bull.

Which plumb amuses Bull, for he grins wider and wider and meaner and meaner and orders Shoo-fly to come over closer to him, sayin' he wants to count the wood ticks in Shoo-fly's whiskers. I see Shoo-fly lick his lips and know that Bull's said too much. I'd have yelled at Shoo-fly if it'd done any good, but I knows it wouldn't.

THERE'S a short-handled camp shovel leanin' against the alder tree which Bull's usin' to rest his back and I see Shoo-fly lookin' at it as he shuffles over to Bull like Bull orders. Then it happens, faster'n sin. Shoo-fly makes a quick little jump and kicks Bull right in the middle.

That kick plumb surprises Bull and don't do him a lick of good. A kick like that never did no man no good. And Shoo-fly, twice as fast as he gets off that kick, grabs that shovel and brings it around in one great big mean swipe.

Bull, gulpin' for air and startin' to line up that Johnny gun, catches the full flat of the shovel smack across his ugly mug. There's enough zing in that shovel to knock a ordinary man clear out of the clover patch. But Bull's a whoppin' big ape and all that wallop seems to do is sort of blind him and spin him around. And as he spins he turns that there Johnny gun loose.

Over yonder, Graff and Skive don't wake up to what's breakin' loose until they hear the *whap* of that shovel landin'. Then they come up, grabbin' for their Johnny guns. Graff, he bawls at Bull, but Bull, he ain't hearin' or seein' nothin'. He's just weavin' around in a sort of drunk circle, hangin' onto that Johnny gun and lettin' her rip, like a blind man with a water hose.

Skive, he lets go a shriek at what he sees comin' his way. He shuts up pronto as that stream of lead hammers into him,

dang near cuttin' him in half. Whilst Bull, still swingin' and weavin' moves right on into Graff.

Graff, he's got his gun durn near level when he gets it. He just sort of seems to hang there, shakin' like a rag in a high wind. Then, plumb chopped to flinders, he's down.

By this time, Shoo-fly, he's got a good foothold for another try at Bull with that shovel. And does he make it good! He comes clear off'n the ground as he puts his whole hundred and twenty pounds behind that shovel. He nails Bull square across his bullet skull and that skull lets go. Bull goes down like a mountain had fell on him and that wild, ruckus raisin' Johnny gun goes quiet.

Roany and that other dame come bustin' out of their tent. They take one look at Graff and Skive, and Roany lets out one brass-bound yelp and faints dead away. The other one squeaks like a stepped-on pack-rat and flops over likewise. I hear somebody let out a funny little wail and I looks around to see Miss Millie with her arms around Lee Hanford's neck, and Lee holdin' her tight and gentle.

And right then who should come gallopin' in across the meadow but Bosco Bates and some strange feller in store clothes!

* * * * *

We're back over in our own camp, I and Puggy and Shoo-fly. The other camp is all packed up and ready to leave. Three of them pack broncs are loaded up with somethin' nobody ever figgered they'd be, when startin' the trip. I felt sorry for the bronc packin' Bull. Alive he'd weigh plenty. Dead, he musta weighed a ton.

Bosco Bates has been bossin' that packin' job. Now him and the feller in store clothes come ridin' over to our camp. Bosco is lookin' pretty grim, but somehow we know it ain't for us. In fact, his voice is almost mild and fond as he says:

"Even three thirsty jiggers like you can have yore good moments. Yuh did yoreselves proud, this trip. Shoo-fly, in yore way, yuh're a lot of man. Anyhow, what I come over here to say is that them three polecats, Graff and Skive and Bull, were bad wanted by the law in the East. They were wanted a thousand dollars apiece, for robbin' a couple of banks and shootin' up several folks. Mr. King, here, has been on their trail and him and me figger you boys are more entitled to that reward than anybody else. So, it'll be comin' yore way before long."

Shoo-fly licks his lips. Not mad-like this time, but plenty thirsty-like.

"A thousand dollars apiece, Bosco? Yuh mean, Ike Ferris and Puggy Jimpson and me, we each draw a thousand dollars?"

"That's right." Bosco nods. Then he adds, dry-like, "But not all in one chunk. I'm goin' to see that it goes into the bank at Cactus City, that yuh square up all yore outstandin' financial obligations and the rest yuh only draw on when I figger yuh need it. Which won't be continual and which won't be at all, unless yuh keep on cuttin' tan-bark, like useful citizens."

"Couldn't we have mebbe—one jug, Bosco, in the near future?" asks Shoo-fly, anxious-like.

"Just one jug, Bosco?" urges Puggy.

"We'll slather the devil out of the tan-bark, if yuh'll send us out one jug, Bosco," I puts in.

We all like this King feller instanter, for he grins and says:

"I think they've earned one jug, Sheriff."

"It's a go," growls Bosco. "I'll send one jug out. But when that jug's empty, you cut tan-bark like the devil was after yuh."

"We'll stack tan-bark plumb across this meadow," vowed Shoo-fly.

"Plumb!" agrees I and Puggy.

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

DEPUTIES THREE

Another Entertaining Cactus City Story by L. P. HOLMES

The unexpectedness of the move caught the men off balance

LAWMAN'S TEST

By BEN FRANK

Young, strapping Jody wanted to be a deputy for his dad, Bayloo County's sheriff, but he had to prove himself first!

JODY JORDON felt the sharp edge of the bunkhouse doorsill against the knotted muscles of his left shoulder. It was a big shoulder. Jody at twenty, like his father, the famous Hank Jordon, sheriff of Bayloo County, topped a six-foot fence post flat-footed, and had trouble finding shirts large enough to keep from splitting across his wide back.

He lifted the shoulder away from the sill and finished rolling the cigarette in his big fingers.

"It's hard to explain," he said to John Enders, the Circle-S foreman. "Jule'n me just don't hit it off, I guess."

A deep snore came from a bunk at the far end of the room.

"Who's sawin' the wood?" Jody asked.

John Enders scrubbed a hand across his whiskery face and grinned faintly.

"A pilgrim who drifted in a couple of hours ago. The old man put him up for the night." His face lost its grin. "It wouldn't be because you an' Jule are about the same size an' top cowhands that yuh don't like each other? You wouldn't be jealous of each other, Jody?"

"Could be," Jody answered tightly. "Also, it could be I don't like the way he sometimes mishandles his horse. Maybe, I plain don't like his face."

"Could be he don't like yore face, either," Enders said dryly. 'I just had a talk with Jule. I'm tellin' yuh the same thing I told him. You two'll have to keep yore hands off each other if yuh want to keep yore jobs. The old man won't stand for trouble."

Jody lit the quirly. He drew in a sweet smoke, let it out through his long, straight nose, grinned a little down at the runty foreman.

"I'll do my best, John," he promised.

Enders kicked off his boots and began to get ready for bed.

"That's good enough for me, Jody, providin' it keeps you two apart." He grinned and ducked his head toward the bunk. "Turn that pilgrim over, Jody, 'fore his snorin' shakes the house down."

Jody crossed to the bunk and rolled the sleeper over. The man sputtered and stopped snoring. Jody returned to his own bunk and climbed into it.

Some of the Circle-S men came in. Among them was Jule Krenk. Jody felt his muscles tighten. He closed his eyes and kept them closed. He heard Krenk's big boots thud on the bare floor, heard the big man's bunk groan.

Lying there, he tried to figure out how the trouble between him and Krenk had begun, and couldn't. Krenk had been a Circle-S rider before Jody. He seemed to resent the younger man from the first. He even went out of his way to show his dislike for the younger man. One thing had led to another, until on this day, they'd almost come to blows.

The pilgrim began to snore again. It was the last sound Jody heard until John Enders bellowed, "Roll out! Chuck's ready!"

At breakfast, the pilgrim, refreshed from a night's sleep, was full of talk. He'd just come from Caravan, the county seat of Bayloo county, and was heading for California. A land of opportunity, he called it.

"Caravan is Jody Jordan's home town," John Enders remarked.

The pilgrim grinned at Jody.

"Reckon you're the sheriff's son," he said. "Your Pa's lookin' for a new deputy. Seems his deputy got tossed off a hoss and busted a hip."

Jody stiffened. Ever since he'd been knee-high to a yearling, he'd wanted to be his dad's deputy.

"When you show me you've got the right stuff in you," Big Hank Jordon had always said, "the deputy job is yours. That is, if Tom should take a notion to quit."

Now, Tom Farrow was laid up with a broken hip.

"Seems that the Chidester brothers have got themselves outa jail an' are operatin' again." the pilgrim went on, helping himself to more flapjacks. "Funny how no jail seems able to hold 'em."

Jule Krenk laid down his knife and stared at the pilgrim.

"You say the Chidesters are ridin' again?"

The pilgrim nodded and stuffed another roll of flapjack into his mouth.

"Reckon that's why Big Hank Jordon feels so cut-up about his deputy gettin' hurt. They tell me Tom Farrow won't ride again. He—"

John Enders shoved to his feet, pawing at his silver watch.

"Boys, looks like we oughta be saddlin' up," he said, putting an end to the pilgrim's talk.

CHAIRS scraped, and matches flared to cigarettes as the men trooped out into the early morning sunshine.

Jule Krenk's beady eyes fixed on Jody's face, and his ugly, flat face took on a sneering grin.

"I reckon," he said, "the great Hank Jordon wouldn't be so great without a first class deputy helpin' him out."

John Enders made a grab for Jody and missed. Jody, a sudden hot anger boiling up through him, had smashed a fist against Krenk's grinning face. The blow jarred along his arm and sent a tingle of pain through his shoulder.

Krenk staggered back, caught his big bulk against a tree trunk and kept him-

self from falling. A trickle of blood dribbled from one flaring nostril and edged along his snarling lips. He balled his fists, shook the straggly black hair out of his eyes and rocked forward on the balls of his feet.

John Enders and the men swarmed in then, stopping the fight before it had a chance to get under way.

"We won't have no more of this!" Enders roared. "Jule, you an' Shorty an' Ed saddle up and get out to the north range. Pronto! Jody an' the rest of us'll start workin' them longhorns through the valley."

"Not me," Jody said tightly. "I'm quittin'."

He turned on his heel and went into the bunkhouse. He dug his six-gun and holster from under the bunk and strapped it about his flat waist. A few minutes later, he'd packed his bedroll and had saddled his horse. He left the horse in front of the bunkhouse and legged it toward the ranch house.

John Enders tried to stop him, but Jody shook his head at the foreman.

"It just won't work, me and Jule on the same ranch," he said. "Sooner or later, we'd have it out, an' somebody'd get hurt. Besides, John, ever since I was a kid, I've wanted to work for my dad. Now, it looks like he could use me. Might even need me. Especially now that the Chidesters are on the prod again."

Enders returned to the barn, and Jody went on to the house and into old man Sampson's office.

Sampson wasn't around, but his gold watch ticked away on the desk top. When Jody bent over to see the time—it was seven-ten—he noticed that a desk drawer stood partly open, exposing a roll of paper money with a rubberband around it.

Jody was in a hurry to get started, for it was a good day and a half's ride to Caravan. So he didn't wait for old Sampson. He went outside, took a look around, and not seeing the rancher, headed for the barn where he met Enders.

"John," he said, "the old man ain't in his office. You tell him I'm leavin' an' that he can send my back pay to Caravan."

"What's the hurry?" Enders asked. "Why don't yuh stay on here, Jody. If yore dad wants yuh, he'll send for yuh."

"It just won't work," Jody declared. "Sure hate to lose yuh," Enders gave in at last. "But I guess yuh know what yuh want to do. Good luck."

Jody shook hands with the man and hurried to where he'd left his horse. The animal acted jittery. Jody caught the reins and swung into the saddle. The horse skittered in a little circle, and Jody straightened him out and headed toward the trail. Afterward, he wondered why his horse had acted afraid.

That evening found Jody camped at the edge of Redhorse Creek. A skimpy supper finished, he sat with his back against a tree and began to roll a quirly. The gray of the coming night began to crowd in among the trees. Jody touched a match to the cigarette. The clatter of horses' hoofs brought him to his feet, and for some reason, he felt a tingle of fear zigzag through him.

A moment later, three horsemen broke into view. They were old man Sampson, John Enders and Jule Krenk. They carried guns, and their faces were grim.

Old man Sampson slid stiffly to the ground, his round middle sagging against his wide gunbelt. John and Krenk kept their saddles.

"Didn't figure we'd catch up with you so easy, Jody," Sampson said.

The cigarette burned against Jody's big fingers, and he dropped it to the ground, tramped it out with a boot heel. For a reason that he couldn't name, he felt on the defensive, even a little scared. His eyes lifted to Krenk's flat, ugly face. The man's eyes shifted away from him.

"What's all the excitement?" he asked, his voice edgy.

Old man Sampson's hand darted out and jerked Jody's gun from the holster.

"Guess we'd look your outfit over, Jody," he said tightly.

Jody's fear turned to anger. He balled his fists and took a step forward. Sampson lifted the gun.

"Take it easy, Jody," John Enders cautioned. "I reckon a little lookin' will convince 'em yuh ain't guilty."

Jule Krenk slid from his saddle.

"Where'll I begin, boss?" he asked.

Sampson shifted his sagging belt, glanced about the camp and nodded toward Jody's pack roll.

"You might start with his bedding," he said.

Krenk got down on his big knees and tore the bedding apart. A gold watch caught the gleam of the dying light and glittered like a yellow, evil eye. Then Krenk's hand came up with a roll of bills circled by a rubber band.

"Is this it, boss?" he asked.

Sampson cursed heavily and took the money.

"This is it," he answered hoarsely. "The money don't mean much, but I'm sure glad to get the watch back. My wife gave it to me before she died."

Jody's eyes whipped about wildly, stopped on John Enders' whiskery face. Enders was staring at him out of bright, hard eyes.

"I wouldn't have believed it," the runty foreman growled.

Old Sampson's face was an angry red.

'Seein's believin', John," he retorted.

Jody got some breath into his body.

"I've been framed," he croaked. "I didn't take that stuff. I tell you, when I left the office, the watch was on the desk, an' the money was stuck in that—" He stopped chokingly.

Krenk, eyes glittering, grinned crookedly.

"I thought you was comin' out of the office," he said.

"What'll we do with him?" Enders asked.

Sampson took the gold watch in his pudgy fingers and shook his gray head.

"Let him go," he answered. "Old Hank Jordon's an old friend of mine. Besides, I got everything back."

Jody shot a glance at Krenk's flat face. Krenk looked disappointed, but he said nothing.

The old rancher shucked the shells out of Jody's gun and tossed the weapon into the middle of a tangle of wild plums.

"Let's go, men," he said, his voice gritty.

He and Krenk re-mounted, and the three men thundered away along the trail.

DAZED, Jody stared after them. Now that they were gone, his mind began to function again. He wanted to talk, wanted to defend himself. Wanted to tell Sampson that there was only one man who would do something like this to him, and that man was Jule Krenk. But it was too late now. He'd stood before them, too stunned to offer any kind of a defense. In his shocked surprise, he had, no doubt, even acted guilty.

A tight, blinding rage filled him. For a moment, he considered riding after the men and accusing Krenk of planting the watch and the money in his bedroll. Then he remembered the angry expressions on the faces of Enders and Sampson and decided against following them. Besides he had no proof against Krenk, only his dislike.

He remembered the nervousness of his horse when he'd left the ranch, and knew now the reason for it. Krenk had a way of frightening and mistreating horses. Cursing bitterly, he retrieved his gun from the bush and reloaded it.

Arriving in Caravan the following noon, Jody headed along the narrow, rutted street toward the jail office. A horse in front of the Placer Saloon caught his eye and gave him a start. He crossed the street to make sure he wasn't wrong. He wasn't. The horse belonged to Jule Krenk. The man had evidently ridden into Caravan during the night.

A cold anger and a feeling of curiosity prompted Jody to leave his saddle and leg it into the saloon.

Krenk stood at the bar, drinking whisky. He turned when the batwings squeaked, lifted his bulging shoulders and wiped a hand across his thick lips. His beady eyes fixed on Jody's face and narrowed.

"Have a drink, Jordon," he offered.

Jody stepped up to the bar, hooked thumbs under his gun belt and eyed the man levelly. For size they were well matched. The few men in the saloon, sensing the sudden tension in the air, stopped talking.

In the sudden rush of quietness, Jody grated, "How come yuh're not at the Circle-S?"

Krenk refilled his glass deliberately and set the bottle back on the counter. He winked one eye at the amber liquid.

"It's none of yore business," he answered. "But I quite last night. I don't go for a boss who encourages stealin'."

Jody's hand shot out. His fingers clutched the gun in Krenk's holster, jerked it free. With his other hand, he pulled his own gun. He put both weapons on the slick counter and gave them a shove. They slid out of reach with a little

rasping sound.

Krenk stiffened, dropped his glass and squared away from the counter.

Jody hit him. This time there wasn't any tree to catch the man. He went down on the sawdust. Hard.

"Yuh've started yoreself a fight, Jordon," he rasped, and got up with a chair in his hands.

He flung the chair, and Jody ducked. The chair bounced over the counter and smashed a half dozen bottles and wrecked a shelf of glasses. Jody went in under the man's long arms and got in three twisting punches before Krenk rocked him back on his heels with a walloping right.

The barkeep came around the counter with an uplifted bung starter.

"Yuh can't wreck my place, even if yuh are the sheriff's boy!" he bellowed and swung at Jody.

Jody took the blow on his upraised arm and smashed back against the wall. The barkeep lifted the bung started for a second blow, but never made it.

The batwing flew open, and a huge, ruddy-faced man barged into the room. A star gleamed on his shirt front, and he shouldered the barkeep out of the way like an elephant uprooting a small tree. He caught Jody by the shirt front and Krenk by the shoulder, and shook them as if they were two squabbling boys.

"Who started this?" Sheriff Hank Jordon roared.

The barkeep shook his finger at Jody.

"He did, Hank. Yore boy come in here, lookin' for trouble. This man offered him a drink, an' Jody hit him."

"How about it, Jody?" Big Hank Jordon asked.

"That's the way it happened," Jody answered tightly. "Only there's more back of it than this."

"You can tell me about that later," the sheriff said. He faced the barkeep. "Figure up the damage, Mack. Jody'll make it good."

He lifted Jody's gun from the counter and shoved it under his belt. He gave Jule Krenk a sharp glance.

"Want to make any charges, mister?" he asked.

"No," Krenk answered shortly, rubbing the red bruises on his chin. "I can fight my own battles."

"All right, mister," Jordon said coldly. "But don't do it in Caravan. Let's go, Jody."

He turned, moving like a cat in spite of his great size, and followed Jody outside. Neither man spoke until they'd gone inside the jail office.

The sheriff whipped his hat from his graying hair and slapped it down on his desk. There was a tight look about his eyes.

"All right, son," he said. "I'm listenin'."

JODY BEGAN at the beginning and told his story straight. He began with the news the pilgrim had told at the breakfast table at the Circle-S and ended with his knocking Krenk down in the Placer Saloon.

Big Hank Jordon shook his head slowly.

"I don't think yuh're a thief, Jody," he said. "But I think you were a fool. Maybe, not exactly a fool, either. Just a youngster who don't use his head. There was nothing to gain by hitting Krenk. Yuh don't have a shred of proof against him. As for the deputy job, you ain't ready for it. Yuh're still the same Jody—jumpin' without lookin' where yuh're headin'. I don't want that kind of a man workin' for me. Chidesters, or no!"

"You mean," Jody said bitterly, "I should let a man like Krenk pull a deal like this on me an' not fight him back?"

"Certainly not," Jordon said. "But yuh've got to learn to do some of yore fightin' with yore head, not all of it with yore hands. That's the trouble with us over-sized hombres. It's so easy for us to use our strength."

Jody felt a rising anger, a feeling of being misjudged and mistreated.

"I've wanted to be yore deputy ever since I can remember," he said. "Now yuh need a man, but yuh won't give me a chance. So I reckon I'll be ridin'—an' you don't need to worry about me ever askin' yuh again for the job!"

Big Hank Jordan sighed, picked up his hat and curled the wide brim in his big fingers.

"There yuh go again, Jody," he said unhappily. "Jumpin' without lookin'. Where yuh ridin' to?"

"I don't know," Jody answered shortly.

"Wait, son," the Sheriff said as Jody turned to go.

He pulled the gun from under his belt

and handed it to Jody.

Outside, with the bright sun against his face, Jody took a deep, unhappy breath. The bitterness in him was like a tight, rasping pain about his heart. Big Hank Jordan had been his ideal for longer than he could remember. Every word the man had said had cut through him like a dull knife.

"When yuh show me yuh've got the right stuff in you," Hank had always said, "the deputy job's yores, son. That is, if Tom should take a notion to quit."

Tom had quit—but Hank Jordon didn't believe his son had the right stuff in him. Maybe, he never would.

Jody thought of the pilgrim then. Remembered that the man was heading for California.

"A land of opportunity," the man had said.

Maybe that was the answer. California.

Jody mounted and rode westward out of town, an impulsive inner voice telling him he should go to California. But for once, Jody wasn't "jumpin' before look-n'." He was remembering what his dad had said about being a fool youngster who didn't use his head. Now that the heat of his first anger and bitter disappointment was over, he guessed Big Hank was right.

"I'll think this over before I decide for sure," he muttered into the still, late afternoon air. "Besides," he added darkly, "I got a feelin' I ain't seen the last of Jule Krenk."

He rode into the timber along the foothills and turned toward Indian Creek, thinking he would spend the night with Ed Hatch, who ran a small outfit on the other side of the creek. Several years back, he'd worked for Ed. Besides, Ed would know about California. He'd lived there at one time.

Coming out of the timber along the creek, he recalled the rumor that the Chidester brothers at one time had had a hide-out in the hills. He turned his horse down the steep bank toward the crossing and pulled up sharply at the sight of three horsemen. The men had their heads up and were watching him. One of them was Jule Krenk. The other two were strangers.

"I don't see no tin star pinned on you, younker," Krenk said, his thick lips curling.

Jody felt his muscles tighten. He wanted to drag the man out of the saddle and go after him with his big fists. But he didn't. He was remembering what his dad had said about doing some of your fighting with your head.

"Is this a lawman, Jule?" the older of the two strangers asked tightly.

The man had a mean, thin face the color of wet putty. A scar lifted one corner of his mouth in a perpetual grin, but there wasn't any smile in his cold, faded eyes.

"He's Jody Jordan, Frank," Jule answered. "Old Hank Jordan's son."

The man called Frank unleathered his gun with a speed that made Jody gasp.

"Get his gun, Lew," the man said.

The second stranger, who resembled the first except for the scar, prodded his horse up beside Jody and helped himself to Jody's gun. He gave the gun to the first man, who slid it under his belt.

It came to Jody then. They were Frank and Lew—the Chidester brothers.

He remembered Jule's interest in the two men that morning when the pilgrim had announced their escape from jail. And he remembered something else. Years back, it was rumored, a third man, a cousin, had sometimes ridden with the brothers. His eyes lifted to Krenk's flat, ugly face. One guess was enough to tell him who the third man had been. Now he knew why Krenk had quit the Circle-S. Why he was here with the Chidesters. It explained Krenk's dislike for him, the son of a sheriff who'd made the going tough for all outlaws.

A prickle of cold fear ran through Jody. He was in a tight spot, and he knew it. This was one time when his great strength meant little. Guns whittled a man's muscles down. Especially when the other man held the guns. If he wanted out of this, Jody knew he had to play it smart.

He turned on Krenk, hiding his fear behind a show of anger.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

Krenk didn't answer. He leaned forward in his saddle, his beady eyes half closed.

"I don't see no tin star pinned on yuh," he repeated.

Jody shrugged. He was using his head now—playing along with the man.

"You won't see one pinned on me," he said. "My old man gave me a goin' over

for pickin' a fight with you. We had it out. I'm headin' for California. I reckon I could use some of that easy money that's floatin' around out there."

"Easy money?" Krenk rubbed his bruised chin and grinned. "Maybe yuh like to throw in with us an'—"

"Shut up, Jule!" Frank Chidester rasped. "Don't be a fool. He's Hank Jordon's son!"

Krenk crooked a finger at the outlaw. He and the man rode toward the creek and stopped out of earshot.

Lew Chidester kept his gun centered on Jody, shifting the weapon once in order to dig out a plug of tobacco from a pocket.

JODY'S eyes moved about, noting the lengthening shadows, seeing the darkening sky reflected in the quiet water of the creek. In the distance, an owl hooted dismally. Inside, Jody's uneasiness was a gnawing pain. He knew that whatever the two men were working out, it wouldn't be good. Not for Big Hank Jordon's son.

Frank and Jule, looking pleased, rode back.

Krenk rubbed at his chin.

"I guess yuh know who these two hombres are, Jody?" he said.

Jody nodded.

"Sure. Frank and Lew Chidester. An' yuh're their cousin."

"See," Krenk grinned. "He's smart like I said."

"Even smart enough to know you put old man Sampson's money and watch in my bedroll," Jody said goodhumoredly.

Krenk threw back his ugly head and laughed.

"That was a joke on me," he said. "I figured the old man would raise quite a rompus about that. Thought he'd turn yuh over to the sheriff—yore own old man. I wanted to make yore old man sweat. He'd made it tough for us, and I don't like him."

"That was a devil of a way to make him sweat," Jody said angrily. "I'm the one who did the sweatin'."

"Forget it," Krenk said. "Let's bury the hatchet. You want to make some easy money. Okay. Tell him how, Frank."

Frank Chidester's putty-colored face broke into a false, friendly grin, making the scar curl upward.

"We got everything set to hold up the Silver City stage that goes through Loop Pass early tomorrow mornin'. They're takin' through a shipment of ore an' they'll have it pretty well guarded. We need us a fourth man. Two for each side of the pass. You throw in with us, an' it'll be a four way split."

Jody almost asked, "Suppose I don't throw in with you?" But he was going to play it smart—no jumpin' before lookin'."

He frowned and pretended to consider the proposition.

"Look," he asked at last, "how can I help hold up a stage without a gun?"

"You throw in with us an' yuh'll get yore gun," Frank promised.

Jody eyed him suspiciously.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"Give him his gun, now, Frank," Jule said. "Show him we're on the level with him."

Frank pulled the gun from under his belt and handed it over butt first. Jody didn't examine it. He knew better. He was playing it smart. That gun, he reckoned, was as empty as the feeling he had in the pit of his stomach. He shoved the big six into the holster and grinned.

"Okay," he said. "I'm with you. California can wait another day."

"See," Krenk said. "He's smart, all right."

Lew Chidester looked worried, but said nothing. Later, as they rode into the hills, Krenk drew Lew to one side and talked to him in a low voice. The worried look left Lew's pasty face, and Jody knew that Krenk had explained his scheme to the man.

Jody had a pretty good idea of what that scheme was, too. Some time during the stage robbery, he'd be shot and left lying on the trail, and people would say, "So Big Hank Jordon's son turned out bad." It would be Krenk's and the Chidesters' way of hitting the big man they hated where it would hurt the worst.

The four men rode into a narrow valley and made camp. Jody helped gather firewood, thinking maybe he'd get a chance to break away in the growing darkness, or slip some loads into his gun. The chance didn't come. One of the three outlaws saw to that.

Krenk set the coffee-pot on the fire, and

Lew got out a large iron frying pan. While the food cooked, Frank took a single barreled shotgun from a pack, cleaned and loaded it.

"Nothin' like a scattergun to talk business with," he said with his scarred grin. "When a man thinks about gettin' filled with buckshot, he don't put up any argument."

Jody leaned back carelessly against a stump and eyed the food with interest.

"I'm hungry enough to eat half a cow," he observed.

But behind his carelessness, he was as tense as a fiddle string. He saw Frank lean the shotgun against a boulder. A burning twig snapped and drew his half-closed eyes to the fire.

The three men sat down around the blaze, and Jody shrugged and got to his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw them tense. He picked up a length of firewood, broke it across his big knee and laid it on the fire. The three outlaws relaxed a little.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I had you all wrong, Jule. I figured yuh didn't like me. An' it was my old man yuh didn't like all the time."

"Sure," Krenk nodded.

Jody raked the edge of the fire with the stick.

"It makes me feel kinda like a fool," he muttered. "Especially when I remember I socked you a couple of times."

"I said to forget it," Krenk grinned. "We've buried the hatchet."

The man leaned forward and hooked a stick under the coffee-pot bail. Lew Chidester was dragging the iron skillet out of the fire. Frank had a half-rolled cigarette in his fingers.

Jody tensed. It seemed now, or never. It had to be now.

He swung the stick in a long sweeping stroke. It raked through the burning coals, flinging them in a wide circle and over the three men.

THE unexpectedness of the move caught the men off balance. The coffe-pot slipped off Krenk's stick, fell into the fire and sent up a cloud of hissing steam and smoke. Lew dropped the skillet and grabbed at his face. Frank fought at the flying fire with one hand and went for his sixgun with the other.

Jody leaped over the fire through the cloud of smoke and steam, booted Frank's gun arm and heard a bone crunch and the man's cursing scream. He caught the man on the side of the head with a plunging knee, and Frank Chidester forgot about his broken arm.

Jody got his hands on the shotgun just as Lew Chidester blasted a bullet at him. The bullet skimmed Jody's ribs, burning like a hot iron, and spanked against the boulder. Jody whirled and fired the shotgun from his hip. Lew leaped into the air, doubled forward and fell on a burning stick. The blood from the gaping wound in his chest made a pool beside the fire.

Krenk's gun came up, and Jody flung the empty shotgun at the lifting arm. The gunstock cracked Jule on the elbow, and his sixgun slipped from his paralyzed fingers.

The two men faced each other, unarmed. Jody bunched his shoulder muscles and felt his shirt rip across his back. Fists knotted, he rocked forward and saw Krenk advance to meet him.

This is it, he thought. This is what I've been waiting for.

He went in crouching and felt his fist jar against the man's sweaty chin. He traded blow for blow with the big man and felt Krenk giving ground. Jody Jordon never once doubted the outcome of the battle. He was fighting for his life. He couldn't lose. And he didn't.

Big Hank Jordon sat at his desk in the Bayloo County jail, studying his son's battered and bloody face, the torn clothes, the scarred knuckles. Jody had told his story. Jule Krenk sat hunched in a jail cell. Lew Chidester lay in the undertaker's back room. And Frank Chidester was nursing a broken arm in a doctor's office. Big Hank hid the great pride he felt for his son behind a scowl.

"So at last you did some lookin' an' thinkin' before you jumped," he said.

Jody tried a grin, but it wouldn't fit his face because of the cuts and bruises.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "But I did quite a lot of jumpin', too."

"I don't hear yuh askin' for a deputy's badge," Hank said.

"No, sir," Jody said. "I ain't askin'. Like John Enders said, if you want me, you'll do the askin'."

(Concluded on page 102)

Caddo's gun roared from his position on the floor

MUDDY WATERS

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Caddo Welch is a man of peace, but when he has to fight it out with ornery gunmen, he sure does a bang-up job!

EVER since he had come to Bailey's Crossing, "Caddo" Welch had been haunted by a vague uneasiness, for he had gone into partnership with Big Ben Darnell without telling him the story of that affair down in Concho. And now, across the street from the Welch & Darnell stage station, the stage of their rival, Oscar Colburn, had unloaded a man who knew more of the uncomfortable truth than he, Caddo, had ever told about that unsavory episode.

This passenger, a man named Rube Newton, had climbed down off the seat with the regular driver, had shaken hands with Col-

burn, who met him, and the two had gone on into Colburn's office.

Caddo Welch, lean as a *bois d'arc* fence post, watched the man from the rear of the wagon shed where he was tightening up the straps on a stage. His face looked old for one so young, or maybe it was just an unusually grave appearance, brought about by strong emotions bottled up inside him.

There was strength in the lines of his mouth, but inside himself, Caddo felt a kind of gnawing pain, a tightening up of his nerves, as though to withstand the impact of the trouble which he knew would be the inevitable result of the appearance of Rube Newton.

Caddo finished his work on the coach, greased the wheels, washed up and went on to the barroom of the hotel which adjoined the stage station. By now it was about an hour since Newton had arrived, but Newton and Colburn were at the bar, along with a crowd of trail drivers and freighters waiting for the Red River to go down enough for them to cross into Indian Territory.

Caddo went to the bar and ordered a beer, driven into the presence of this man Newton by an urge which would not let him longer evade a trouble which he knew eventually to be inevitable.

Newton suddenly halted his conversation with Colburn as his widening eyes settled on Caddo. Caddo, watching through the back-bar mirror, tensed but did not turn his head.

Newton slowly set his glass on the bar, his eyes riveted on Caddo. His clenched hand went toward his holstered gun, came away empty as his face hardened. Then he took half a dozen steps, closing the distance between himself and Caddo.

"Howdy," he said.

"Howdy," Welch answered coldly, alertly.

"So you're the man who's tryin' to put Colburn out of the stage business!" Newton's voice was rising, taking on a note of scorn.

"No, I'm not tryin' to put Colburn out of business," Caddo said. "Why do yuh say that?"

Newton turned to Colburn, a cold, twisted smile on his face.

"This competitor of yores—of ours," he said. "You know who he is? Ask anybody from down Concho way who Jim Welch is. They'll tell yuh a pretty story."

CADDO WELCH turned his back to the bar, leaned elbows over it. Newton was talking loudly, putting on a show and wanting an audience. He had the attention of the whole barroom now, and he swaggered, with his thumbs hooked into his gun-belts. Unarmed, Caddo waited for it to come out. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Yuh don't have to worry about this yeller coyote, Colburn. I'll tell yuh his pedigree in short order. He was drivin' for the Concho Stage Company, runnin' down from the silver mines to Kiowa, and I was the shotgun guard. We got held up one day, and Welch here dropped his reins and dived into a thicket alongside the road, leavin' me to fight off half a dozen men. Just run out on me like a jack-rabbit, and we didn't see hide nor hair of him for three months.

"The law down there charged him with bein' an accessory to the crime. It was thought down there that he was in cahoots with the holdups, tippin' 'em off about the load of silver, and desertin' the coach durin' the robbery and joinin' the bandits afterwards. Yes sir, if folks here knew that about him, they wouldn't be wantin' him haulin' either them or their valuables."

The crowd knew the keen rivalry between Colburn and the Welch & Darnell stage lines for the business into the wild, roaring Indian country, and they instantly sensed that this made the fight personal. Surprised at the charges of cowardice and crookedness flung in Welch's face, men in the room were silent. They stood back, giving the men plenty of room.

Caddo's hand tensed on the stem of his beer glass. He lifted the glass slowly, then threw its contents square into Newton's sneering face.

"Yuh're a slimy liar," he said coldly.

Newton sputtered, wiped his foam-dripping face with his shirt sleeve, while his astonishment turned into a blinding rage. He clawed for his gun. The crowd, seeing that Caddo had no gun, yelled. Colburn himself shot out a quick hand and yanked Newton's gun from its holster.

"Yuh can settle it with fists," Colburn said. "I don't want my men gunnin' down unarmed men."

"Colburn's makin' a grandstand play!" somebody back in the crowd yelled. "I know that bully!"

In his blind rage Newton lunged forward with his strong fists doubled—and walked into a flat blow from Caddo's right. He staggered back, but he had the strength of an

ox, and he was coming in again instantly. His own right shot out. Caddo rolled his head around it, and it slid on over his shoulder.

Then Newton's left followed it in, and the blow caught Caddo on the chin, knocking him back against the bar. Caddo shook the cobwebs out of his brain, and now he was cool, yet he burned within on account of many things this man had done to him before trying now to wreck his business. It was a relief to come to blows with Newton, the physical action giving release to the nervous tightness which had been in him so long.

Newton came in, and in the still room, Caddo's fist cracked loudly against the man's jaw, straightening Newton up for a moment. But only for a moment. For the next they were exchanging hard, punishing blows that showed Caddo Welch that this antagonist of his was a hard man to whip. But win or lose, the job was to his liking. It was the first opportunity he had ever had to come to grips with the man.

Newton was a rough-and-tumble fighter who knew no law but that of the claw and the fang. He suddenly kicked out and the toe of his boot caught Caddo in the stomach and doubled him up, and while he was like that Newton caught him by the hair and beat his skull against the bar rail. He did not even hear the grumble of "dirty fighting" that went through the room.

Caddo was dizzy from the pounding, and the strength was ebbing from him as his head bounced against the oiled pine bar. And even as he was punishing Caddo, Newton sent his foot out, hooked his toe behind Caddo's legs and jerked his feet out from under him. They went down in a pile together.

Newton picked up the beer glass Caddo had dropped on the floor, gripped its stem and broke the bowl of it against the foot rail of the bar, leaving it a jagged-pointed weapon in his hand. He slashed it down across Caddos face, plowing strips of bleeding flesh from the cheek-bone down to Caddo's chin. Caddo's own blood blinded him, was salty in his mouth.

In desperation, Caddo struggled for possession of the weapon, and finally got the splintered glass daggers pointed away from him as he rolled over, taking Newton under him for a moment. In the confusion of the struggle, the pointed glass came against the under side of Newton's chin and blood suddenly spurted from the man's neck.

Caddo hung on until Newton's muscles seemed to lose their power, and he was no longer fighting. Then Caddo got up, leaving Newton lying on his back, the broken beer glass still in one hand. With the other, he was trying to stop the flow of blood from his neck.

"Get me a doctor, before I bleed to death!" the man groaned.

The fight was over. They got the doctor for Newton, but the doctor could do him no good. . . .

THE sheriff was in the Welch & Darnell stage office, with Caddo and Big Ben. His investigation in the saloon had been brief, and it had cleared Caddo, because of the word of practically every man in the place. Even Colburn had not come to the defense of the man he admitted having just hired to drive one of his stages. But despite this, there was still a buzzing in the saloon over the story Newton had told.

Sheriff Bullock was a fair man, but he was not a mental giant. All he wanted was peace in this two-fisted jumping-off place by the red sand bars of the river.

"This is bad stuff for you boys," he said to Caddo and Big Ben. "They're talkin', Caddo, and what they say ain't nice. Course, they'll believe anything. People's like that."

"It don't mean a thing to me what they say," Big Ben said in his deep voice. He weighed close to two-seventy, and wore a long copper beard on his red face, and an aura of power was about him. "Caddo is my pardner, and he's goin' to keep on bein'. I don't believe a word of what that man said."

Now the time had come for Caddo to pay for his previous silence, and it hurt him to have to say what he must to the man who was his partner and his friend.

"Ben," he said, "there was enough truth in that yarn to make it sound good. But it wasn't the whole truth."

The big man stroked his beard. "Yuh can't tell me yuh run out on a stage robbery?"

"No. But it looked enough that way to make people believe it. This is what happened."

He was standing by his chair, foot up on the seat, and his eyes were staring out through the window, as though looking into the distant past—and the future. He could see them both, and neither was pleasant.

"The Kiowa Stage Company," he said, "was run by Doc Woods, the brother of the county judge, and this fellow Newton was a

kind of poor relation that had married into the family. Somebody that Newton knew framed that robbery, and Newton was in on it, as the tip-off man. He had sounded me out on the deal, and I'd stalled him along, tryin' to get more information, but he got suspicious and didn't tell me any more.

"I didn't speak to Woods about it because I didn't have enough information to back up my charge, but I kept my eyes open. I wanted to prove my case. So when the robbery happened, this Newton fired his shotgun into the ground instead of at the bandits.

"I figured they'd try to kill me to make it look good, so I dived off the seat into the brush and circled around them to get the drop on 'em. I stepped on a rattlesnake accidental, and jumped and made some noise, and one of the bandits turned and shot me. When I come to, it was the next day and I was lyin' in the cabin of a trapper, so bad shot up that it was a month before I could get out of bed, and another month before I could get around much.

"And in the meantime, this trapper, named LaFlore, that was married to an Indian woman, was hearin' around about the gang that had done the robbery, and Newton was known to be down in San Antonio spendin' a lot of money. Newton had put out the story that it was me that was in cahoots with the robbers, and not him, and so the blame settled on me while I wasn't around to tell my side of it. They got a warrant out for me.

"I figgered it wasn't any use to come in and tell my side till I had somethin' to back it up, so I kept out of sight while I was tryin' to get some proof. But what little proof I finally got didn't satisfy Doc Woods or the Judge, since Doc had already collected his insurance, and they didn't want their own family's name brought into it. However, they dismissed the case against me for lack of evidence."

"It takes a lot of proof to change public opinion," Big Ben said.

"I found that out," Caddo agreed. "I told my side of it, saw nobody took any stock in it, so I got disgusted and quit that country, comin' up here. I should have told yuh this before, Ben, but I was kind of ashamed of runnin' away from there instead of stayin' and fightin' it out, though there was nothin' I could do to get the case cleared up legal, even if I could have proved my side of it."

"Yuh done all yuh could," Big Ben said.

"But that don't help us now," Caddo answered. "Colburn will use that story to ruin us, and that ain't fair to you. I'm takin' out, Ben. Without my name, yuh've got a better chance against him."

"Yuh ain't doin' no such thing," Big Ben declared firmly.

CADDO was looking off across the broad stretches of the Red River, its banks full of muddy water boiling down out of the country it drained during spring flood time. Up there in Indian Territory was wild, new country that needed taming, and where no one asked about the antecedents of those who came to tame it.

"Yes," he said, "I can get along all right. And without the name I'd give the business, Ben, you can make a go of it. With me, yuh can't."

"Colburn ain't got us licked," Big Ben said quietly.

"It's the ideas in the people's minds that he'll use to whip us with. And yuh can't fight what's in folks' minds. I can fight a man that calls me a coward or a crook, but I can't fight people's private opinions."

"Well boys," the sheriff said, "that's yore affair. All I want is that there ain't any trouble here. It's bad enough when the riff-raff shoots each other up. I don't want good men gunnin' each other."

He got up and left. When the door closed behind him, Big Ben went over and put a hand on Caddo's drooping shoulder.

"I know men, son," he said, "and I know how yuh feel. It takes a big man to be able to take a lickin' without his pride gettin' hurt. What's botherin' you is that yuh've took a lickin' when yuh knew yuh was right, and yore pride wouldn't let you stay and face the music. Yuh can't run from yore own problems, because yuh take 'em along with yuh when yuh run. So you just stay right here, and we'll lick this thing."

Caddo turned toward the door.

"Thanks, Ben," he said. "But right now, I can't see any good come of me lettin' yuh throw away everything yuh've worked a lifetime for. I'd rather not go on with the pardnership. We'll straighten it out in the mornin'. I've got to go and get Doc Blossom to patch up this cut on my face."

He went on out into the night, and was glad of the darkness. At the same time he knew this was as though he wanted to be in hiding, and the idea did not set well with

him. It made him angry, and he knew that he could not use his best judgment when he was in any such mood. And right now he needed all the judgment he could muster to work out his problem.

He moved on down the street, and was passing under the oil lamp over the door of Bailey's Store when Oscar Colburn came out with "Red" Sorrels, one of his shotgun guards, who now wore a hip gun. Colburn saw Caddo and stepped out on the board walk squarely in front of him, waiting with his hands on his hips.

Oscar Colburn was a big man of driving, ruthless power, who had literally roared and fought his way up to ownership of the stage line he had set up in competition with Welch & Darnell. He had a square, clean-shaven face, and wore a big red cravat with a diamond-studded horseshoe pin in it.

Even before Colburn spoke Caddo saw that the stage owner was wasting no time in pounding home the advantage that had suddenly come to him. Colburn did not move, and Caddo had to stop.

"Colburn," he said, "yuh shouldn't do that."

Colburn's massive body continued to block Caddo's path. "Mebbe not," he said, "but I'm doin' it. I want to talk to yuh."

Caddo shrugged. "All right," he said. "Say yore say. I'm listenin'."

"Well, you and Darnell are through," Colburn said. "Yuh know that. I'm offerin' yuh four thousand for yore equipment."

"For what cost twenty thousand dollars?"

"It's better'n starvin' to death—or fightin' a fight yuh know yuh'll lose. Sell, or I'll drive yuh out of the country—but make up yore mind right now."

"To my way of thinkin'," Caddo said coldly, "that proposition don't even deserve an answer. Step aside and I'll go on about my business."

Still Colburn did not move. In the dim light of the overhead lantern, his heavy-jowled face was set, and something seemed to go through him as through a man who loved a fight for the sake of the outlet it gave him for his ruthlessness.

"I don't step aside for no jack-rabbits that hightails at the sound of a gunshot," he growled. "Just walk around me, Welch, and walk easy. Now and later."

"Colburn, yuh're standin' where I aim to walk," Caddo said.

"Yuh belong in the gutter," Colburn said, and suddenly he shoved Caddo toward the edge of the walk. "And I'm the man that'll put yuh there."

Caddo's fist shot out like the hoof of a freight mule. It caught Oscar Colburn squarely on the nose. Caddo felt cartilage crunch under the blow, and Colburn fell back against the wall of Bailey's store and slid to the walk.

Colburn got up with blood spurting. He blew his nose loudly and felt of it gingerly. It moved from side to side under his touch.

The gunhand named Red growled a question.

"No," Colburn said. "I'm goin' to kill him myself." He looked at Welch. "Mister," he said, "get yoreself a gun. From now on, I'm lookin' for yuh, and I'll be wearin' a gun. Yuh can either come a-shootin' or if yuh're still afraid of a gun, by glory, I'll pistol-whip yuh into the river!"

"If yuh're thinkin' of killin' me," Caddo said, "yuh'd better not wait that long." He himself was thinking that he would probably be up in Indian Territory by morning.

He walked over the space on the sidewalk where Colburn had stood, and went on down the street toward Dr. Blossom's house.

DR. BLOSSOM was an old man with a white mane and beard, and there was something about him that invited trust and confidence. As Caddo sat in his front room which was a combined office and living room, he found himself talking as he had not talked to anybody before. He had not realized that the kindly old man had seen that he was laboring under more than the temporary nervousness brought on by the fight, and had cleverly led him out.

By the time Doc Blossom had cleaned and dressed the wound on his face, Doc had got the whole story.

"And so," he said then, "right now when old Ben needs you most, you're pulling your freight, just on account of personal pride." Old Doc shook his head. "I never looked for you to let a pardner down like that."

Surprised, Caddo answered shortly,

"Ben will be better off without me. That's why I'm leavin'. I ain't afraid of Colburn's gun, and it's a lot harder to leave without facin' Colburn than it would be to face him. If I was to win that fight, it still wouldn't help Ben in the minds of the folks here, as long as I was known to be his pardner."

"In short," Doc said, "you're more concerned with what folks believe about you

than you are in helping Ben when he needs you."

"But he don't need me. As soon as the river goes down, I'm headin' for the Territory."

"You just think he don't. Ben has got a bad heart. I've been trying to make him take it easy for a year, but he's been overdoing all along because, he told me, you needed his help."

"I never heard about his heart before," said Caddo.

"He figgered if you did, you'd try to carry the whole load, so I agreed not to mention it. He's pretty conscientious about his sense of duty."

Caddo got to his feet and paid the doctor.

"All this makes me feel like the old river," he said. "All muddied up inside. It's not the river's fault that it is full of mud and driftwood. It's the fault of the streams that pour their trash into it. But the river gets the blame. People are already talkin' around that I'm a coward. If I don't stay and face Colburn, they'll take that as proof that I am a coward. And if I do stay, and stand for all that talk just in order to help Ben, he'll have the right to think I'm a coward for not havin' the courage to get out of the business to save him. And then, I'm beginnin' to wonder myself if I ain't a coward for not wantin' to stay and face what I know is in people's minds."

Dr. Blossom chose his answer carefully.

"Yes," he said, "the river gets muddied up, but it stays right where it is put to serve its purpose, and finally it clears itself and settles back down to its job. Ben is a good man. His moral strength is worth more to a community than a dozen men like Colburn. But Colburn has the drive and the ruthlessness to ruin him. I wish I could advise you, Caddo, but I can't. I can only remind you of the facts. You've got to make your own decisions."

"Thanks, Doc," Caddo said, and suddenly felt a great lightness about him, as though a heavy burden, long borne, had dropped from his shoulders. "I reckon I had some of that mud in my eyes all along or I'd have seen it before. If I can't settle the matter for myself, I can at least try to settle it for Ben. I owe him that much—and more."

He went out, and the night wrapped itself around him and left him secluded with his thoughts. He walked toward the river, where he stood on the bank of the swollen stream for a long time, thinking.

The river was falling slowly, and the drifting logs and fallen trees were fewer than they had been for the last few days. The river was slowly clearing itself, and in a few more days there would be nothing to show for the muddy flood waters it had carried except a few new cutbanks, where the river would from then on run smoother, stiller, deeper.

And so Caddo's own mind was clearing itself of flotsam, casting off its debris and clearing his thoughts so that he could see the way his course must run. He knew that within him there had been revolt at having to leave this new town which he had had a part in building. His place was here; he had cut the channel through which his life must flow, and he was not the kind who could leave it at the first sign of a flood.

Pride had guided his choice of a means of helping Ben, and it had guided him falsely. The town needed him, Ben needed him. And he needed them both.

Now to him the matter of facing Colburn was simple. Colburn had threatened to gun him on sight. Colburn was strong, ruthless, but he had only his physical strength and contempt for the rights of others, and these things were not the strength of a man like Ben Darnell, whose power lay in his character.

IT WOULD be Darnell whom Colburn would destroy, and in doing so he would be destroying much of the moral fiber of the town. And so now Caddo's duty became clear to him. He must face Colburn's gun, not for the satisfaction of his own pride, but as a duty to Darnell, and to the town which was their home.

He turned in the darkness and walked back toward town with a lightness of step which he had not known for a long time. He passed along the sleeping street, where thin blades of light cut out from behind the drawn shades of those who were his neighbors—Ben Darnell's neighbors. These people had done their day's work, earned their night's rest, and the muddy water flowing outside their closed doors was nothing to them.

The sound of his boots thudded against the silence as he walked on past the lighted entrance of the saloon and went up to his room in the hotel. He lit his lamp and found pencil and paper. Emptying one of his bureau drawers he turned the drawer upside

down in its slot, so that its bottom made a kind of desk, and at it he sat and wrote slowly for half an hour.

When he was through he cleaned up, put on fresh clothes, and put the paper in his pocket. Then he took his gun out of the bottom drawer of the bureau, oiled it and spun the cylinder until it whirled without friction. He strapped the belt around his waist, tied the toe of the holster to his leg with its string, and tried his draw, seeing to it that no roughness in the holster interfered with it.

He was not a match in speed for the typical professional gunman, nor had he ever killed a man in a gun duel. He was just a man who, like many another citizen of a wild and lawless country, had spent a reasonable length of time learning to shoot.

He did not doubt that the poorest professional gunman could outshoot him with time to spare. But he was not going out to match speed with a gunman. He was going out to face a showdown which could not be avoided.

He stopped off at the little building where Hek Thomas printed the Red River *Times* and slept in the back of his shop. He woke Thomas up, handed him the story he had written. Thomas sat on his rumpled bed in his long underwear, yawned, and read it through from start to finish without speaking.

"Writing your own obituary, Caddo?" he asked then.

"Mebbe so," Caddo said soberly. "That's the true story of what's happened up to now. Tomorrow yuh'll only have to add which one of us is to be buried, and print it."

Thomas scratched his tousled head.

"I don't know," he yawned. "I'm not what you'd call a crusader. If you win this shooting match, of course I'll print this story as news. But if you don't—well, as much as I need the money, I wouldn't print this as a paid full page ad. I know this Colburn better than you do, apparently. He'll have this mud flat in his hip pocket in another five years if he lives."

Caddo saw how it was with Hek Thomas, and he knew it could not be otherwise with the rest of the people here. They had their own lives to live, their own interests to preserve. He got up to go.

"I can safely tell you one thing, though," Thomas said. "I'd like to see you win this fight, for the good of the town. So I'm going to tell you something that I know, but can't prove. And, frankly, I wouldn't be telling you if I didn't believe that one of you would be dead before you have a chance to say that I told it. I'm telling you because I hope the knowledge will make you try a little harder to be the winner. Do you know who that red-headed gunslinger is that Colburn has hanging around?"

"No," said Caddo. "I'm not interested in him."

"Well, you might be. Before I came up here, I worked on a little paper not far from Concho. This redhead is a paroled stage robber. The sheriff in my county knew, but couldn't get evidence to prove, that Colburn was backing a bunch of highbinders who preyed on the silver mines. He got tips, worked out plans, made arrangements for the sale of bar silver, and the like. Never touched a stolen piece himself, nor ever threw a gun down on a stage driver, but he was the boy behind most of it down in that country. Only thing was, he was too smart ever to get caught. I was just thinking, in the light of what you've written down in this story—"

"I see," Caddo said quietly. He pondered a moment, then said, "Yuh're probably right in what yuh think. But that is past, as far as I'm concerned. I done what I could down there, but it wasn't enough. The lickin' I took down there bothered me for a long time. But it don't any more!"

WHEN he said that, he meant it, and knowing he meant it was good for him. He did not hate or fear Colburn; he merely had a contemptuous pity for a man so blind as to believe that force and cunning were sufficient for the needs of a man.

But he did not have contempt for Colburn's brash courage, nor for Colburn's gun.

"A good newspaper man would get dressed and go down and get the story of this fight first-hand," Thomas said.

"I'll wait for yuh to dress," Caddo offered.

"No," Thomas yawned again. "When I see somebody I like killed, it makes me mad and I write pretty hard things about the winner. That's bad for business. When I see somebody I dislike get killed, it makes me sick, and that's bad for my stomach. Just pass me that bottle over there on the stand, and I'll go back to bed. I'm not what you'd call a good newspaper man."

Caddo Welch passed on out of the print shop and down the dark street toward the light over the door of the saloon. Now there

were fewer lighted windows, and the street was so quiet that over the sound of his own footsteps thumping hollowly on the board walk he could hear the murmur of the river as it took an abrupt turn just below the ford.

Overhead the moon was a silver dollar cut in half, and it bathed the empty street in a silken sheen of light, softening the raw forms and colors of its pine buildings, bathing it in peace and beauty. There came to Caddo that possessive feeling which men get when walking a sleeping street alone, that sense of ownership, or of partnership with all that which lay about him. And to Caddo also came full consciousness of his sense of duty to this place he called home. It was to him a beautiful place, and he wondered why he had never before noticed just how beautiful.

He paused under the light outside the swing doors of the saloon, looked one last time up and down the street, heard one last time the distant murmur of the receding waters of the river. And then he swung open the doors and walked into the saloon.

As he entered the lighted barroom and stopped a moment just inside the door, the buzzing at the bar suddenly stopped as though someone had pressed a button and cut it off. And Caddo knew that it was because he had been the subject of the conversations.

As his eyes took in the room, he saw Oscar Colburn at the corner where the bar joined the wall. Colburn had a patch of white adhesive tape across the bridge of his nose, and his eye were puffed. The red-headed gun-toter was with him, and Colburn was the center of a small knot of men who had been listening to him.

Then one of Colburn's group saw Caddo Welch, and his face took on the guilty look of a hound caught stealing eggs. The man saw the gun on Caddo's hip, read the signs right, and shuffled out of Colburn's neighborhood. Others, seeing his hasty retreat, turned and saw the lean form of Caddo just inside the door, and found that they had no further business near Colburn.

When the sudden shuffling of feet was over, Colbun stood alone at the end of the bar. Even the redhead stood some ten paces to his left, his back to the wall, and his green eyes watching Caddo with a dead-fish stare.

Colburn had put on his gun, and after only a fleeting moment during which he could not hide his surprise at seeing Caddo here to call

[*Turn page*]

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his hand, he acted. Aggressive and ruthless as he was, and faced with the necessity of backing up the talk he had just been making about the man who had come in, Colburn did not wait for words, had no use for any. He had put himself into a position where he had no choice but to go for his gun and, knowing this, he wasted no time.

When Colburn drew, it was a fast draw for a man so large and muscle-bound. His gun roared before Caddo got his weapon clear of its holster. His bullet spun Caddo half around and slammed him against the wall, where he slid to the floor.

The blow of the bullet paralyzed his left side, but Caddo now had his weapon clear of leather.

The partial success of the attack served to save Caddo's life, for a bullet from the gun of the red-headed man hit the wall where his head had been only a breath before. The two men were whip-sawing him.

Caddo chose to dispose of the professional gunman first, and before the redhead could fire the second time, Caddo's gun roared from his prone position on the floor. The redhead's gun dribbled from his hand, and he fell down on the floor and died.

Colburn had lowered the muzzle of his weapon and triggered it again. His bullet plowed up sawdust and kicked it into Caddo's face, where it clung in brown freckles on the broad white strip of adhesive tape on his nose.

BUT Caddo Welch did not know these things. He lay flat in the sawdust, and through a dim haze saw the big form of the man before him, firing bullets at him. And then Caddo Welch with his left arm paralyzed, began inching himself forward on the floor with his two knees and the elbow of his gun arm.

Another bullet kicked at his body, and it was like the kick of a mule. It knocked him to one side, and he had to roll over again before he could continue crawling toward the man who was shooting at him. But there was no stopping him.

He wondered why it was that he could get in so few shots himself, and yet he knew that he was firing as rapidly as it was in him to fire, aiming at the white bandage on Colburn's nose. He heard the roar of his own gun, and it sounded now as though it came from a distance, like some sound down on the river.

And then before his dimming eyes, he saw Colburn's knees bend, then buckle and let the man down in a sitting position, with his knees jack-knifed up so that they were making a frame for his face.

Then Colburn toppled over on his side, his knees still doubled up, and lay as though he were asleep. That was the way the big man died.

Caddo knew that he felt sleepy himself, and then the next thing he knew, it was morning, and he was in his bed in his hotel room. Doc Blossom and big Ben Darnell were with him, and Hek Thomas was there, too, with a special edition of his paper. They all began talking when they saw he was awake.

Old Ben put his hand on Caddo's shoulder, and he had a way of doing that which could give a man a better feeling than a thousand words of talk.

And after all, there wasn't much to talk about. The river was going down, and was quiet again.

Caddo went back to sleep.

LAWMAN'S TEST

(Concluded from page 93)

The sheriff grinned a little then.

"Always said that if yuh ever showed me you had the right stuff in yuh, the job was yores. Providin' Tom ever quit. An' Tom's quit!"

He reached into a drawer of the desk and lifted out a gleaming badge.

"An'," he added, "yuh showed me you've got the right stuff in you."

He got to his feet and stood beside his son. They were well matched in size. When the older man reached up to pin the badge on Jody's bloody and ragged shirt, his own shirt ripped across the back.

"Thunderation!" he growled. "Looks like somebody'd make a shirt big enough for us Jordons."

Jody didn't say anything. He just grinned and wiped a sleeve across the gleaming badge. Ever since he could remember, it seemed he'd been living just for this moment.

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 9)

prospectors tried to trail him into the mountains, but he outwitted them or killed them. Wolz is said to have admitted killing eight men because of the mine, including his own nephew. He died in Phoenix about 1884, with a shoe box of the beautiful ore under his bed. Almost with his last breath he gave a friendly neighbor directions to the mine, saying they must be followed exactly as the mine entrance was concealed under ironwood logs covered with rock. Unfortunately the most important landmark in Wolz's directions, a palo verde tree with a peculiar pointing branch, could not be located then or later.

Since then literally thousands of prospectors, both professional and amateur, have searched for the Lost Dutchman Mine, and their luck has been uniformly bad. Some have never come back at all, others have returned with pieces of human skeletons and accounts of almost dying of thirst, and still others have been mysteriously shot at in the wild canyons.

The tragedy and violence connected with the Lost Dutchman have added to the strong conviction of Arizonians that the Superstition Mountains are cursed. Some people say that pigmies guard the mine; some think it possible that a few wild Apaches still live up there; and others believe some prospector has found the Lost Dutchman and kills anyone approaching the bonanza.

Of course there are some who say that Dutchman Wolz never had any mine, and that the whole story from the start is fiction; but judging by the number of prospecting expeditions into the Superstitions annually, these skeptics can never command as large an audience as exponents of more exciting theories.

If there is not, and never was a Lost Dutchman Mine, the mine that does not exist has been searched for perhaps more than any mine that ever came to the attention of gold seekers since gold was first discovered!

Mining Superstitions

Miners as a rule are superstitious. Most of them believe that accidents occur in threes. When one happens two more will follow in rapid succession. Miners also say that accidents are more frequent at midnight,

[*Turn page*]

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and men on the night shift always feel safer when the hour is past. A woman, it is said, will invariably bring bad luck into any mine; and the resulting taboo, whether it serves as a real or convenient excuse, makes it very difficult for women to visit an Arizona mine.

Mine rats are liked rather than otherwise by miners, as the men believe the rats will give warning of impending cave-ins and bad gas. Miners do not regard this as a superstition, as they say that the rats notice the slightest movement of the surrounding rocks and scamper to places of safety. It is bad luck to kill a mine rat and a miner who does so is in the same category as a man who, above ground, mistreats a dog.

The underground rats live from the scraps tossed them from the miners' dinner buckets, and they become very accurate timekeepers, appearing at the exact moment the lunch hour begins, even before the miners sit down to open their pails. Miners who work for a long time in the same mine get to know the rats as individuals and naturally give them names such as "Old Timer," "Johnny-on-the-Spot," or whatever strikes the fancy of the individual making the name.

Ed Scheffelein's Strike

There was one prospector in Arizona who made a strike, caused a stampede of prospectors, made a boomtown spring up that rivaled in lawlessness the cattle trail end town of Dodge City, Kansas, or the mining town of Deadwood, South Dakota. That man was Ed Scheffelein.

For many weary months Scheffelein had prospected the Burro Mountains in search of mineral wealth, which he declared was there and which he claimed he was going to find. In his daily travels he always drifted back into the foothills to make his nightly camp among the immense boulders about two miles north of where the town of Tombstone now stands. Apache Indians were numerous and always on the warpath in those days, and as cattle ranches were few and far between, they were always kept well supplied with guns, ammunition and men. The cowboys usually traveled in bunches, well armed and ready to play a hand in any game which the warlike Apache might suggest.

An army officer once asked Scheffelein what he was always looking for, and he replied, "I'm looking for stones." The officer

answered, "The only stone you will ever find will be your tombstone." A few months later when the strike was made and a new town sprang into existence, Scheffelein remembered this conversation and named the town "Tombstone."

The Badmen of Tombstone

Tombstone, in the prime of her life, had a population of nearly ten thousand people, and while among that population there were many God-fearing men and Christian women, there was a strong percentage of rough miners, horse and cattle thieves, stagecoach highwaymen, train robbers, gamblers and gunmen.

From the birth of the new town Tombstone and in the decade that followed, or from 1877 to 1887, there were probably more real gunmen in Tombstone and in the county in which it was located than in any like area in the United States.

The badmen were a law unto themselves, and settled their mutual differences without recourse to the courts of law. It was a case of the survival of the fittest. Coroner's juries

[*Turn page*]

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often rendered a verdict of "suicide" in favor of the party of the second part on the grounds that he should have known better than to have attempted to get the drop on a man who he knew was faster than he.

It was next to impossible to secure the conviction of any badman arrested for any offense because the juries were mostly made up of his own kind. If an honest man found his way into the jury box, he was considered a maverick. He was generally afraid to express his own convictions, and, not wishing to antagonize the accused or his friends, would swing over to the majority and the prisoner would usually be acquitted on the grounds of "insufficient evidence."

Along about '81 and '82 it was estimated that there were not less than 200 known outlaws within the sparsely settled county of Cochise, and perhaps twice that number of men who declared themselves neutral, which did not benefit the law but did benefit the outlaw.

From Bad to Worse

Stage holdups were almost a daily occurrence, and many short stage routes were abandoned on this account. Cattle rustling and horse stealing, interspersed with frequent murders, were the most popular forms of occupation indulged in by the lawless element.

Things in Tombstone went from bad to worse until some of the citizens began to see it as their duty to back the law and at least give the lawmen their moral support, and then with the work of a few lawmen like Billy Breakenridge, law and order began slowly to be restored.

The great trouble with most of the boomtowns like Tombstone was that some of the lawmen were almost as lawless as the outlaws they were supposedly trying to subdue, and there were many unnecessary killings by lawmen who in reality were out-and-out gunmen and who depended upon their reputations with a six-gun to cow all other men.

The OK Corral Battle

One gunfight in Tombstone that will always be talked about was the battle at the OK Corral, in which some of the most noted gunmen of that era took part. It was supposed to be a fight between the law and the outlaws, but from all accounts it was more

of a grudge fight between gunmen.

It was a fight between the Clanton and McLowery gang on one side and the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday on the other. Wyatt Earp, although a marshal in Tombstone, was said also to be a fugitive from justice, being one of the men charged with the killing of Frank Stillwell in Tucson, but Earp had refused to submit to arrest by the sheriff and went right on being marshal.

About four years ago one of the old landmarks of the wild days of Tombstone, the "Bucket of Blood," was destroyed by fire. It was quite a respectable cafe when it went up in flames, but in the wild days of the boomtown it was a notorious saloon and gambling place and within its walls on many occasions gun-battles had taken place and men had died with their boots on.

It took all those things, and all those boomtowns, however, to help make up the old West, to constitute the history of a vast empire where danger, romance and death seemed to ride hand in hand, and although it is much changed now the tales of its mines and men will live on and on. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

BOTH human and reptilian killers stalk in TRAIL OF THE BLUE SNAKE, the swift-moving Wayne Morgan novel by Gunnison Steele in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN.

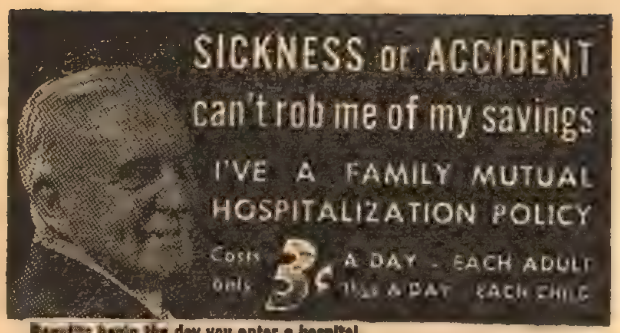
Pursued by a band of ruthless gunmen who hungered for their lives, Hugh Tait and his sister, Starr, fled down from the timbered foothills in a desperate race for the floor of Whitebear Basin and safety. But Hugh's horse suddenly went lame, and the girl slowed her dun, refusing to forge ahead.

"Go on, Starr, don't hang back for me!" Hugh Tait cried urgently. "Maybe you can make it to the Star Cross. I'll hole up somewhere and hold the skunks off till yuh can bring help!"

The girl shook her head firmly. "I won't leave you! We'll both make it, or neither of us. They're gaining fast, Hugh!"

The youth twisted in his saddle to glance backward. Less than a quarter of a mile away he saw half-a-dozen riders emerge from a belt of timber and race toward them. As Hugh watched, a thin plume of smoke

[*Turn page*]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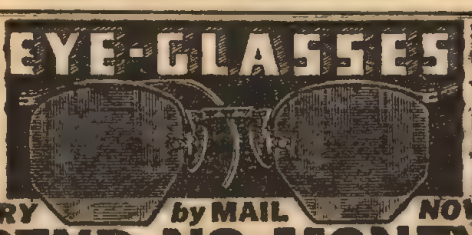

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DEALERS WRITE

lanced out, and a second later they heard the high, thin whine of a bullet.

"They've got rifles and aim to cut us down," Hugh said savagely. "They'll do it, too, in no time. Starr, you've *got* to go on and try to get away."

The girl said nothing, only shook her yellow head again. Then suddenly she lifted her finger and pointed.

"Those cliffs over there, Hugh—wouldn't that be a good place to make a stand?"

"About our only chance—if it is a chance!"

They had dipped into a low place between two ridges. Now they swerved their horses and headed toward a nest of low red cliffs two hundred yards away on the floor of the little sink. The base of the cliffs was lined with boulders. They gained the cliffs, urged their horses into a shallow niche and leaped to the ground. Hugh Tait snatched his rifle from a saddle boot.

"Into them boulders over there," he snapped. "They may get us, but they'll know they've been in a fight first!"

They darted among a nest of waist-high boulders which formed a sort of natural fortress and flung themselves to the ground. Before them, and on two sides, was more or less open ground. At their backs were the sheer walls of the cliffs.

Just as they gained the shelter the half dozen riders, led by a gigantic man with dark, brutal features, plunged over the crest of the low ridge. They spurred down into the sink. And then, obviously puzzled, they slowed their mounts, their eyes probing in all directions for their prey.

Suddenly one of them pointed. "There're their broncs, over there among the cliffs," he shouted. "We've got 'em treed!"

Knowing they were discovered Hugh Tait rammed his rifle barrel over a boulder and blazed a shot at the riders. One of the horsemen yelled, slapped at his thigh as if a wasp had stung him. Then they scattered like a covey of quail, seeking various places of concealment. Seconds later not a man was in sight.

But from behind boulders and out-jutting ledges they opened up. Gunfire rolled and thundered among the walls. Hot lead hailed against the boulders behind which the boy and girl huddled, showering them with rock fragments, ricochetting wickedly off into space.

Their foes had edged closer, even called to Hugh and Starr to surrender and been

refused, when the girl uttered a startled exclamation.

"Look, Hugh!" Starr cried. "On the ridge!"

Hugh twisted his head to look where she pointed. There on the crest of the ridge before them, silhouetted darkly against the blazing crimson of the late afternoon sky were the figures of two riders.

One of them was like a master painting in black. A tall, stalwart rider, mounted on a magnificent coal-black stallion. He wore black sombrero, a black domino mask covered his eyes, and draped over his powerful shoulders was a black cape. The other rider was a Yaqui Indian, lithe, powerfully-built, mounted on a wiry gray. The two paused there on the ridge crest a moment, gazing down into the sink like stone images.

"It's the Masked Rider, Hugh!" Starr Tait cried. "I've heard he has a habit of showing up where he is badly needed—and now I can believe it!"

The gunfire had slackened among the killer gang. Obviously they too, had seen the two riders and were puzzled.

Abruptly the masked man lifted a hand and pointed. As if by magic, a black, long-barreled six-shooter appeared in each of his hands. The huge black stallion reared, pawing the air, and then rocketed down the ridge, followed closely by the Indian on the gray.

A cry rose from the attackers.

"It's the Masked Rider," a man shouted. "Let's get outa here!"

"Stand an' fight, yuh sneaking coyotes!" bellowed the dark-faced leader. "What if it is the Masked Rider? There's only two of them and a half a dozen of us. Cut 'em down!"

The gunfire started up again, raggedly.

The Masked Rider drove the mighty stallion, Midnight, recklessly down into the sink. The twin black Colts in his hands were blazing, roaring, the sounds mingling with the deeper-toned crashes from the rifle of Blue Hawk the Yaqui. The two men had separated slightly, but they never faltered in their wild, headlong charge.

The deadly recklessness of the attack had its effect on the killer gang. Their fire was wild, inaccurate.

And now Hugh Tait, yelling derisively, leaped upright and blazed away with his Winchester, while Starr joined in the firing with her rifle.

[*Turn page*]

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A man among the boulders yelled, stumbled and fell, then went scuttling on hands and knees like a giant crab for shelter. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk swerved slightly, riding in a quick half-circle, their guns still blasting. Behind the domino mask the black-garbed rider's eyes were cold as blue ice. He seemed a part of the stallion as he rode, guiding the great beast with a pressure of his knees, his black cape billowing out behind him.

Suddenly the killers' nerves broke.

"We're caught between two fires!" one of them bawled. "I ain't paid to be cut to pieces —I'm ridin'!"

Their ranks broke quickly, and they retreated, clawing and scuttling back through the boulders toward their horses. Hammering lead from the roaring guns of the two riders turned their retreat into a panic-stricken rout. Seconds later, there was a swift clatter of hoofs against hard earth as the killer crew spurred up out of the sink and vanished over the low ridge.

In coming to the rescue of Hugh and Starr Tait, the Masked Rider and his Yaqui com-

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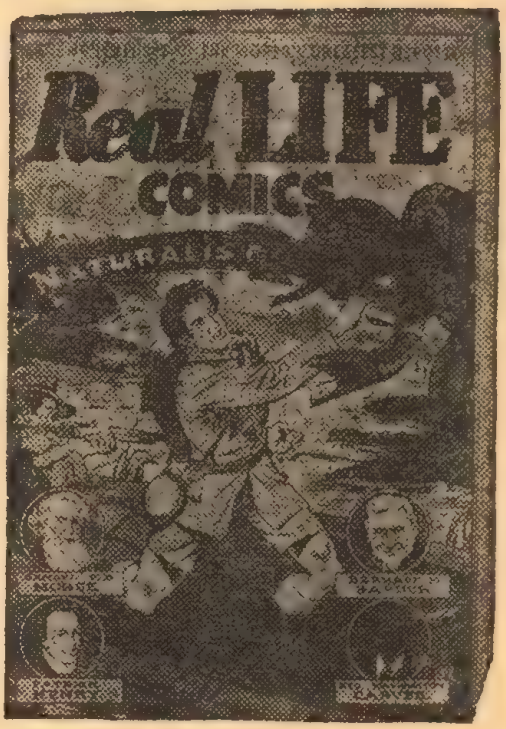

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panion found themselves taking an active part in a range mystery that called for brains and daring. Why had the killer crew been so determined to kill the boy and girl? That was one of the questions to which Wayne Morgan sought the answer.

That same night the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk heard gunfire—and then a scream of terror. Morgan and Blue Hawk separated and went to investigate. It was the Masked Rider who found a dying man, and the Yaqui who returned with a strange tale of a huge blue snake that gleamed in the darkness.

The Masked Rider finds that he is battling dangerous and clever men and the way he fights his foes and finally wins makes TRAIL OF THE BLUE SNAKE a novel that will hold you spellbound from start to finish! It's a humdinger packed with action and surprises—look forward to it!

DEPUTIES THREE, by L. P. Holmes, which also appears in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, is a yarn filled with chuckles and thrills. Ike, Puggy and Shoofly never thought there would come a time when they were willing to aid Boscoe Bates, the big tough sheriff of Cactus County—but they do just that, with results that are highly amusing!

There will also be a careful selection of other short stories and features in the next issue. Plenty of entertainment for everyone in a gala issue replete with good reading.

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[*Turn page*]

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RIDER WESTERN. By knowing your likes and dislikes we are able to plan future issues for the maximum enjoyment of all concerned.

As there are so many letters this time we are only able to quote brief excerpts from a few of them. However, we thank all of you here and now for your interest in MASKED RIDER WESTERN. And now let the readers have their say:

I have just finished reading THE HAUNTED HOLSTER in MASKED RIDER WESTERN for the fourth time and I think it is a wonderful story. I hope that every story of the Masked Rider will be as good as this one.—*Willie Ferguson, Maversville, Miss.*

I bought one issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN and immediately I asked for a subscription to it. In other Westerns I have read there have been only about one or two stories I have enjoyed. In MASKED RIDER WESTERN I have enjoyed all stories. Everytime my magazine arrives it keeps me glued to my chair until I have finished it.—*Philip Greely, Quincy, Mass.*

I have just finished another exciting story in MASKED RIDER WESTERN. It was THE HAUNTED HOLSTER. Keep up the good work.—*Henry Nelson, Stanley, N. Dakota.*

I enjoy MASKED RIDER WESTERN very much as well as some of your other magazines. I think romance between other sub-characters is all right, but not good for Wayne Morgan.—*Tony Chance, Detroit, Texas.*

I enjoy all the stories in MASKED RIDER WESTERN very much. I'd like it if the Masked Rider would get married. Please put more love in your stories. I really and truly enjoyed THE RANGE WRECKERS. I think the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk are grand.—*Betty C. Maphey, Montgomery, Ala.*

I agree with many other readers in saying that the *Masked Rider* should tell how he became an outlaw. I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for slightly over a year and it is very interesting and exciting.—*Richard Peterson, Rice Lake, Wisconsin.*

I have just read the latest issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN and it is the best story besides the first one I have read yet. I haven't hardly missed a copy in about three years. I like best the stories that Jackson Cole and Hascal Giles write.—*Pauline Gaines, Mitchiville, Tenn.*

I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN best, next to my favorite magazine, which is TEXAS RANGERS. I am ten years old.—*Clarice Ann Austin, Kent City, Mich.*

My father, sister and I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for four years and we think it is swell, but we should like to know how and why he became the famous Masked Rider.—*Dorothy Cuteri, Struthers, Ohio.*

I have just finished the second MASKED RIDER WESTERN I have read. I like the magazine very much. I like action-packed Westerns with lots of gunplay and horses mentioned often.—*Joyce Kratzer, Unionville, Iowa.*

I have read MASKED RIDER WESTERN since 1943. My first one was GUNPOWDER STRIP, by Chuck Martin. He is the best author of all.—*John Rocky Ford, Hoyt, Colorado.*

A few years ago I bought a Western to see what they were like. When I read the book I liked it so much I have bought every issue since then. It was MASKED RIDER WESTERN.—*D. W. Mercer, Lumberton, N. C.*

I have read many of the MASKED RIDER WESTERN stories and enjoyed them very much—and I agree with other writers—don't put too many girls in the stories.—*Grace Lawrence, Boston, Mass.*

That's all the letters for this time, but there will be more quotes from your letters next issue—and let's hear from more of you.

Tell us which stories and authors you liked best, and about those which did not appeal to you. Please address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. See you all next issue. Thanks—and so long!

—THE EDITOR.

TRIGGER FINGERS

(Concluded from page 68)

too much. I recken there won't be no witnesses agin' Pop Rood now, if yuh'll let me fork my hoss and high-tail out of here."

Lee Gartell felt the chill of a terrible fear that left him trembling on the inside.

But his voice was steady when he told the gunman:

"Then get on that hoss and head down the trail, Grimes, before I get plumb mad at yuh."

He stood there grinning, while Grimes mounted and rode away.

Then he looked down into Sally Rood's starry blue eyes.

"I reckon that bluff was backed with somethin' solid," he announced. "Still think I'm just a trigger-fingered button, Sally?"

She shook her head, "No! I never did think so! I was just scared you would get yourself killed." Then excitedly, "Oh Lee, now you'll get back your water rights, the cow outfit and all the things they stole from your father. And Pop will get out of jail!" Her eyes clouded slightly. "But won't you be terribly lonesome out on that place by yourself?"

He shook his head, grinning. "I reckon I won't, Sally. On account of I was figgerin' on asking you'n Pop to share the place with me—if you ain't scared of marryin' a—a gun-slammer."

She crimsoned slightly, "Why, Lee, there's people listening!" she cried. But she nodded, and in her shining eyes was her answer.

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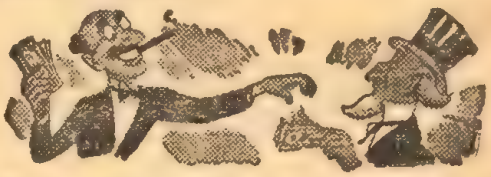

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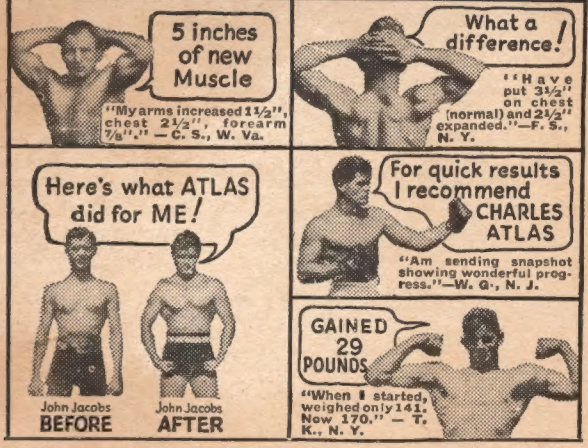
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"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞"." — C. S., W. Va.
What a difference!
"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME!
John Jacobs BEFORE
John Jacobs AFTER
For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170." — T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest — In competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This photo of Charles Atlas is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your Strength through *"Dynamic Tension"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 476, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

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